

# The California Sunday Magazine





“ WE HAVE TO  
KEEP WORKING.  
NO MATTER  
WHAT’S GOING  
ON IN THE  
COUNTRY.”



60 **THE SQUAD**

**In Venezuela, a glamorous career becomes a means of survival.**

*Photographs and text  
by Esther Black*










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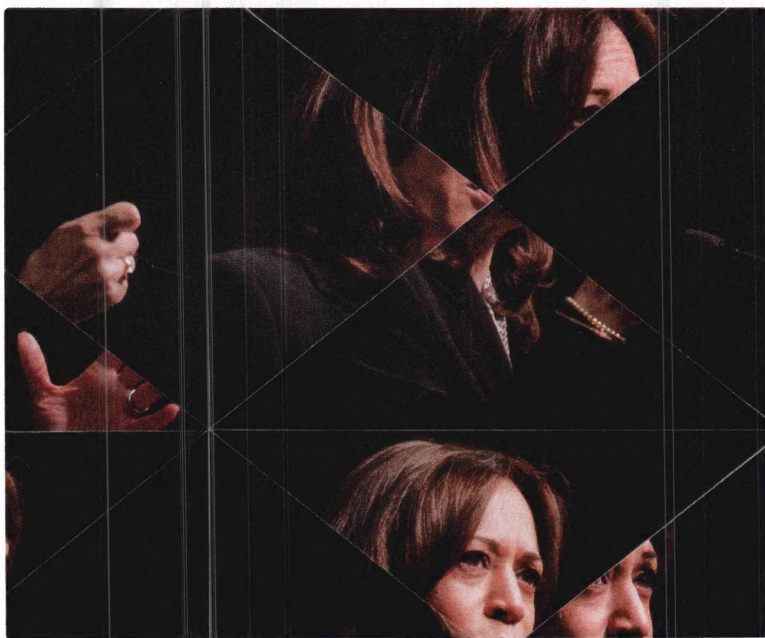
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### THE UNKNOWNABLE KAMALA HARRIS

The complicated career  
of a self-proclaimed  
progressive prosecutor

By Nicole Allan

Artwork by David Samuel Stern



### THE BILLBOARD

After Stephanie Montgomery says she  
was raped at the strip club where she worked,  
she went to the manager and the police.  
Nothing happened. That's when she decided  
to tell her story as big as she could.

By Kathy Dobie

Photographs by Isadora Kosofsky







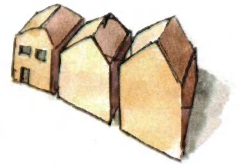
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**"SOMETIMES OUT  
OF SOMETHING AWFUL,  
SOMETHING  
WONDERFUL HAPPENS."**

How the depressive,  
unsettling, surprisingly buoyant  
humor of Lisa Hanawalt and  
Raphael Bob-Waksberg — creators  
of *BoJack Horseman* and  
now *Tuca & Bertie* — is changing  
the adult animation series

By Robert Ito  
Photographs by Michelle Groskopf  
Lettering by Liana Finck

←



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**The Saviors of  
Glen Park**

By Wendy MacNaughton



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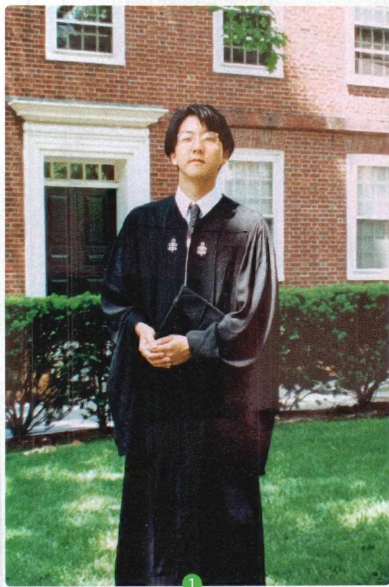
**FOR HIRE**

**The job market through  
the eyes of college graduates  
in search of work**

As told to Joy Shan and Tom Colligan  
Photographs by Taylor Kay Johnson  
Illustrations by Marta Monteiro







Millions of recent high school and college graduates are filling out applications, sending out résumés, and trying to navigate new jobs. For this issue's Shorts department, we decided to take a close look at the working world that awaits them. I asked my colleagues here at *California Sunday* and *Pop-Up Magazine* if they could share some of their own experiences just starting out.

**Me: When you thought about your employment prospects at 21, how did you feel?**

**John Woo,<sup>1</sup> Senior Story Producer for Pop-Up Magazine, Class of 1992:** When I graduated college in the '90s, all I wanted to do was work in bookstores. I loved reading, and it was a safe bet. I thought, *Bookstores are everywhere, and that will never change.*

**Louise Tan, Assistant Controller for Pop-Up Magazine Productions, Class of 2002:** My graduation was in May 2002, just a short time after the 9/11 terror attacks. It was disheartening to be told over and over again that the only reason I wasn't getting a job offer was because I was a foreign national at the time.

**Jacqueline Bates,<sup>2</sup> Photography Director of The California Sunday Magazine, MFA, Class of 2009:** In undergrad, I had three jobs. I knew I wanted to work in photography, but I wasn't sure if it would be at a museum, a gallery, or a magazine. So I tried them all out. I knew by the time I graduated I'd need a decent résumé to compete with everyone else. New York is so intense that way.

**Me: Tell me about your first job.**

**Anita Badejo,<sup>3</sup> Executive Editor for Pop-Up Magazine, Class of 2012:** I was a third-grade teacher through Teach For America. I knew I ultimately wanted to be a journalist, but I was too anxious about my prospects when so many publications were folding or reducing their staffs. TFA felt like an opportunity to do something else I was interested in that had social

impact and could buy me some time to see how things would shake out in the media industry.

**Nancy Miller,<sup>4</sup> Editorial Director of the Brand Studio for Pop-Up Magazine Productions, Class of 1995:** I paid my living expenses in college by working in the service industry. When I graduated, I continued to do that and led a double life: bartender and cocktail waitress at a nightclub Thursday through Sunday to support an unpaid journalism job during the week.

**Roseli Ilano,<sup>5</sup> Community Producer for Pop-Up Magazine Productions, Class of 2004:** My first job was as a community organizer making \$26,000





per year. There's a lot to be said about doing some of the most meaningful work in my career and not being able to make ends meet in the Bay Area.

**Cameron Bird,<sup>6</sup> Research Editor for *The California Sunday Magazine*, Class of 2008:** I was a community-interest reporter at the *Orange County Register*. I was unprepared for how hollowed out the newspaper had become. Something like half of the desks were empty. Entry-level reporters had little in the way of mentorship or formal career development.

**Me: Did college debt factor into your career decisions?**

**Cameron:** I had a smallish mountain of student debt, so I felt pressure to get a job



as quickly as possible after graduation. I took the very first offer — not a bad job, but also one that didn't excite me, paid terribly, and boomeranged me back to the place I grew up. Of course, moving back in with my parents also took away the biggest expense, rent, which made it possible to start paying down the principal on my debt.

**Anita:** Not financially, no. I was fortunate enough to have my parents pay for my education. However, there was definitely a lot of mental debt if I thought too long about how much they had spent and tried to quantify what I was spending my life doing (or not doing).

**Jacqueline:** Yes. I studied photography in school, and most of my friends did the freelance hustle and bustle, never really knowing when the next paycheck would come. I had a ton of student loans. I needed a full-time job immediately so I could start paying them off. I didn't take chances like a lot of my artist friends did because of that debt.

**Me: What ideas about work did you have then that you don't believe anymore?**

**Nancy:** I used to think unpaid work was the reality if you were young and starting

out, and I was jealous of people who could do it without a second job. Now I see it shouldn't be that way — and I'm happy to see a shift in the industry to make internships more fair and equitable.

**Jacqueline:** In my 20s, I lived at work. Work defined who I was. Now I understand how important it is to have distance and set boundaries. You bring so much more creativity and inspiration when you come back to the work with fresh eyes.

**Me: What's something you learned that you still carry with you?**

**Kit Rachlis,<sup>7</sup> Senior Editor of *The California Sunday Magazine*, Class of 1975:** That pretending you know more than you do is a terrible stance to take, especially for a journalist but in life in general.

**Victoria Chow, Communications Director for Pop-Up Magazine Productions, Class of 2014:** Keep in touch with your colleagues, past and present. The assistants I came up with are all decision-makers now.

**Roseli:** People remember when they've been seen, included, and valued. How you treat people and collaborate with them is everything.

**John:** The boss is often not the smartest person in the room.

**Jacqueline:** Be kind to one another. Believe in yourself and take chances. Seek the advice of people you admire. Do your research. Be patient.

Doug

EDITOR IN CHIEF



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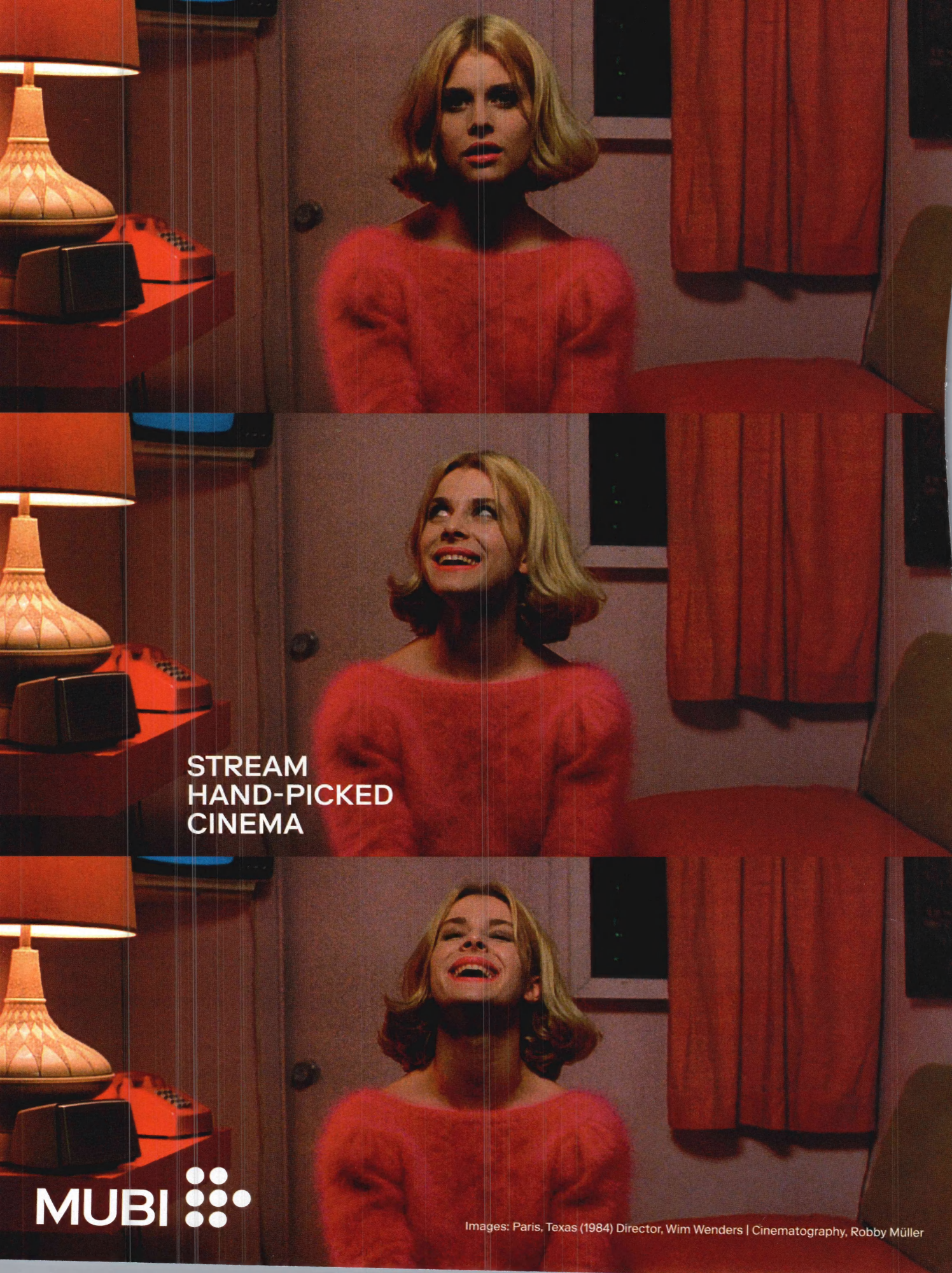
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Images: Paris, Texas (1984) Director, Wim Wenders | Cinematography, Robby Müller







When the class of 2018 graduated from college, they were the first of a new generation — Generation Z — to join the workforce. They watched their parents lose their jobs a decade earlier and fall into debt and worry about whether they'll be able to retire. They've seen the rise of part-time work, the decline of well-paying entry-level jobs, and the continued shrinking of once-stable career options. Although the economy has recovered, for many graduates, financial security still feels unattainable. In these pages, teachers, students, job-seekers, parents, and résumé-embellishers reveal what they think it now takes to earn a living.

As told to Joy Shan and Tom Colligan  
Photographs by Taylor Kay Johnson  
Illustrations by Marta Monteiro

## Entry-level jobs are no longer entry-level.

In the midst of the 2008 financial crisis, the nature of the entry-level job fundamentally changed. To cut costs, companies were increasingly driven to outsource or automate low-level work, eliminating the very office jobs that once served as a foot in the door. Meanwhile, as unemployment climbed to 10 percent, employers were suddenly faced with an abundance of skilled, experienced workers to draw from. So they revised their requirements accordingly. A job that once required a GED was filled by somebody with a bachelor's degree; a role designed for somebody fresh out of school was given to an employee with three years of industry experience. This phenomenon, what economists call "credential or experience inflation," would outlast the Great Recession. According to a 2018 survey conducted by TalentWorks that sampled 95,000 job listings, more than 60 percent of so-called full-time "entry-level" jobs required three or more years of **experience**.<sup>1</sup> So how do you get started? A few recent hires offer their advice.

### It's OK to lie. A little.

LIV, 23

Last October, I moved to the Bay Area and started looking for a job. I'd worked at the library all four years in college, so I applied for jobs at libraries. That was hard because I don't have a master's in library science. I was also looking at barista jobs, and though I hadn't worked as a barista, I had worked in customer experience and retail. But everything from those barista jobs to these entry-level publishing and library jobs would ask for a couple years' experience, or at least a year.

I'd sit in coffee shops or my apartment, looking and applying for anywhere from three to seven hours a day. I found work at a corner market in downtown Oakland. I was working at the register, stocking things, making people coffee, still looking for other jobs.

On my résumé, I've learned to lie about how much work I've done. I've done a lot of volunteer work, and that's seen as less relevant than work you've been paid to do. So I learned to redescribe things using specific turns of phrase. Instead of saying

"jobs and volunteer work," just say "relevant experience." You don't have to specify whether you made money. In college, I'd worked on an arts and literature magazine. At first, I thought to put it under the "Hobbies" part of my résumé — I was a volunteer. Instead, I decided to describe the work like this: "I edited hundreds of poems and prose submissions over three years." My library job in college was pretty low-key. I didn't really do any cataloging. But I'd spent a lot of hours cataloging when I was helping my friend at his bookstore over the summer, even though I wasn't paid. So I decided to say that I cataloged books at the library.

I guess I didn't actually lie, though I am in favor of lying, too. It's lying a little bit, but it's also counterbalancing pre-existing power structures where certain kinds of experience are valued and other kinds are not. And going into interviews as a woman, I have frequently felt nervous, thinking, *Well, I'm obviously not qualified. Nobody is going to take me seriously.* Yet I know so many men who know jack s---. So it's important to counterbalance, to talk the talk on your résumé. Because everybody else is going to do it.





Liv at her job as a program assistant at a large university

1

"It seems like they would loosen those requirements now that we're in a tight labor market, but they haven't. Why don't you lower the requirement and train people up? It doesn't seem to be happening."  
— Nick Beleiciks, a labor economist

2

"A lot of businesses have downsized their human-resources function, so they've taken a bunch of it online. You can post a listing and get 200 responses, but you have to figure out how to make that into a manageable number to even start looking. Employers are looking for things that are easy to filter, such as exact years of experience."  
— Molly Scott, a senior research associate at the Urban Institute

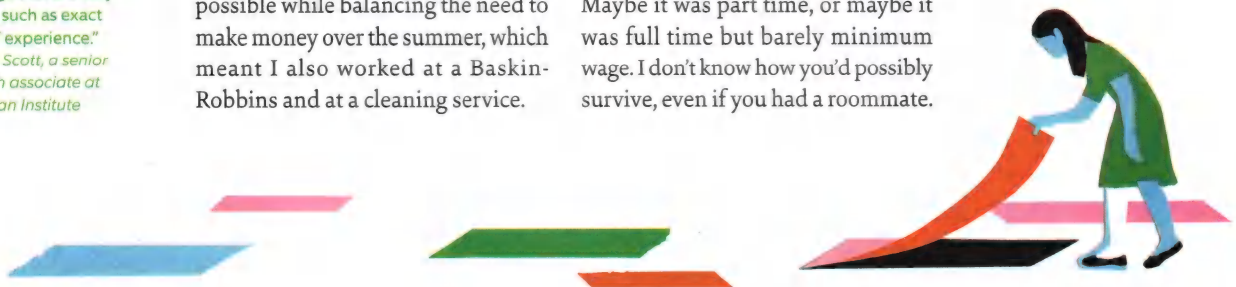
## Find a smaller pond.

CLEO, 24

Since high school, it was impressed upon me to make sure that I was building my résumé, and my back-up plan had always been to work in marketing. I'd done all the "right things" — I interned at a nonprofit doing social media, I had a job at the office of alumni and parent engagement all four years of school, I worked as a publicity director for our college radio station. I got as much experience as possible while balancing the need to make money over the summer, which meant I also worked at a Baskin-Robbins and at a cleaning service.

Three months after graduating from college, I started to buckle down on finding my first job. I was searching [online](#)<sup>2</sup> for entry-level positions in Southern California. But even the entry-level ones required work experience. I was seeing all these positions that I thought I could do, that — if I were given the opportunity — my work ethic could make up for the lack of experience. But the opportunity wasn't available. I also saw a lot of positions that were lowballing what was realistic to live on in California. Maybe it was part time, or maybe it was full time but barely minimum wage. I don't know how you'd possibly survive, even if you had a roommate.

After three months of searching, I had to start paying interest on my student loans, so I was trying to find anything at that point. I was looking at nannying, part-time jobs, and Craigslist had a lot of those opportunities. Eventually, I started looking at Craigslist for cities nearby. A digital-marketing agency had posted a position for an assistant, and they were looking for somebody who was local, and that's how I found my first job. →



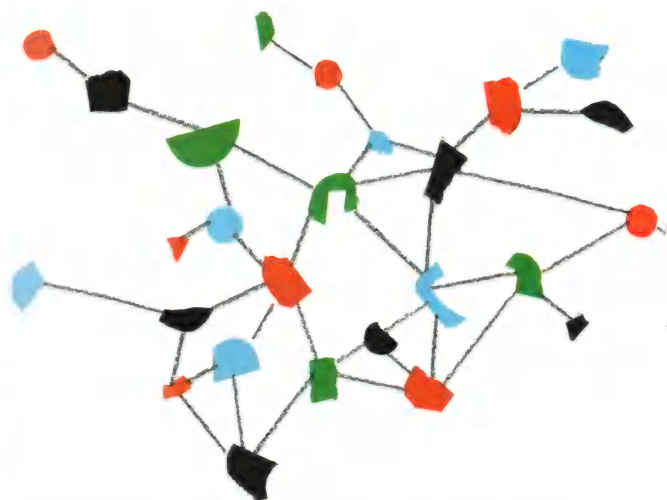


It was a smaller company, and they weren't trying to spend a bunch of money to list a job on LinkedIn. What's great is that there's an actual person on the other end who reads your application, and the applicant pool also ends up being smaller, which makes it easier to stand out. I was able to wiggle my way in.

**Work your connections  
(and ignore your college  
career center).**

GABRIEL RICHARDSON, 23

I went to a private liberal arts college, where it's almost assumed you'll spend no more than two years between graduation and graduate school.



My school gives you the preparation to do a Ph.D. program, but that's not what most students want to do.

**After I graduated, I started looking for entry-level positions,**<sup>3</sup> mostly paralegal or legal secretary jobs. My first tactic was to try the traditional websites: Indeed, LinkedIn, Glassdoor. I'd click the "entry-level" filter and enter the search term "paralegal," but you could spend four hours going down a list of available positions, some of which required four-plus years of experience, or a master's degree and specializations.

At Reed, we all have to write an undergrad thesis our senior year, which we defend before we graduate. The advice I was given from my school's career services was: "Take your thesis with you when you have an interview." That was the worst mistake. I was applying to secretarial positions at law firms — helping attorneys file regulatory documents, basically being the good-old secretary for the counsel of whatever firm. I was interviewing with an IP firm that focused on a very particular subset of machinery coming out of Japan. I'd have to fill out forms and do data entry. I'd come in with my 100-page thesis that had a lot of graphs, visual analytics. I'd show it to the employer, and they'd look at me with an almost worried face and

Gabriel Richardson at his aunt and uncle's home in Orange County, where he's currently living. He'll soon be moving to Mexico City for a new job.



Jake Silver at his environmental fellowship for the city of Fremont, California

ask questions like, “Are you comfortable doing mundane tasks?”

When you come out of a **liberal arts college**,<sup>4</sup> you’re in this Catch-22, where you’re a little too educated on certain things, but you’re not specialized and don’t have technical knowledge. We’re stuck-in-betweens. Some companies have programs for entry-level positions, but they recruit from large state schools or research universities. These types of schools have enormous alumni networks, as well as large career services to guide students into these systems. My friends spent the same amount of money as they would have to attend an Ivy League school — they have \$15,000 on average in debt — but our networks are much smaller. College has prepared us very well academically, but it left us hanging when it comes to the real world.

For the majority of people, it’s who you know. A friend from college was starting this academic consultancy in Mexico and was looking for somebody to help her with the business. We prepare students for SAT, ACT, and applications. This opportunity came organically. I didn’t seek it out. I received that offer in the beginning of March, and I’ll be moving to Mexico City.

### Embrace the fellowship.

JAKE SILVER, 22

Early in my search, I was on Indeed looking up words I associated with entry-level jobs: “junior,” “associate.” But those jobs required one, two, three years of experience.

I began tailoring my searches to look for “fellowships,” and that’s when I got less lost. I started finding programs geared toward workforce development, structured for people who recently graduated. Right now, I’m in an 11-month program, and for most of the cohort, it’s our first job out of college.

I get a monthly stipend that, after taxes, comes out to \$1,600 a month — which, in the Bay Area,

doesn’t get you very far. I can cover rent and groceries and some fun, but I’m damn fortunate my parents support me. They help pay for major life things — my phone, car insurance, health insurance. My car broke down last week, and a stipend like that doesn’t cover unexpected costs. But I want to get off my parents’ bill **as soon as possible**.<sup>5</sup> I feel guilty about it. They’re trying to retire soon.



<sup>3</sup> Only 15.4 percent of 2017 college graduates were still seeking employment six months after graduation. In the states west of the Rockies: almost 27 percent.

<sup>4</sup> Since 2007, the number of bachelor’s degrees in history has fallen 25 percent; English, 22 percent; philosophy and religious studies, 15 percent.

<sup>5</sup> Twenty-eight percent of recent graduates moved back in with their parents in 2016 versus 19 percent in 2005.



## New workers are cobbling together gigs, internships, and contract jobs.

Work has changed. One in five jobs, according to a 2018 poll from NPR and the Marist Institute of Public Opinion, is held by a contract worker — a **shift**<sup>1</sup> that's affected industries from transportation to law to tech.

Unlike traditional salaried roles, these jobs tend to be temporary and unsteady, and often lack health or retirement benefits. Recognizing the evolving employment landscape — and the new

**hazards**<sup>2</sup> it presents — colleges have been retooling their curricula. Wellesley's career-education site has a section devoted to independent work. Babson College offers an MBA course on how to succeed in the gig economy. Lewis & Clark College offered a workshop last year on "Breaking Into the Gig Economy," which advised students on how to "prepare yourself for a job that may not yet exist." And in the fall of 2017, the California Community Colleges system launched a pilot project called "Self-employment Pathways in the Gig Economy," the first statewide initiative of its kind. Twenty-three schools have since taken part. Here, instructors and administrators share how they prepared students for this world of work.

1

Half of income earners between the ages of 16 and 24 make some money through independent work. Companies save up to 30 percent of labor costs when they treat workers as independent contractors rather than full-time employees.

2

In her book *Hustle and Gig*, sociologist Alexandra Ravenelle interviews nearly 80 gig workers and observes that people who most needed to work were often put in risky situations: performing physical labor without protection from on-the-job injuries, delivering packages of illegal substances, and enduring harassment from customers.

3

One of Rivaldi's sample assignments: Go to an online work platform (Upwork, Fiverr), pick a "role model" freelancer, figure out how much he or she is making an hour and what skills that freelancer is offering. Outline a plan to learn those skills.

### JEFFREY FORREST

Vice president of Economic and Workforce Development at College of the Canyons

I've worked with different age groups, and the differences were startling. Those in their 40s and 50s looked at gig work as a side job, something to do until they got what they wanted. People in their 20s are more likely to look at it as a permanent option. They noticed that many of their friends weren't getting decent, middle-skilled work after college. They see opportunities as having dried up; many graduate and all they have to show for it is debt. Plus, people in their 20s are willing to be more risky, much more than somebody with a family and a mortgage.

### ALESE CAMPBELL

Business deputy sector navigator at San Joaquin Delta College

Many are going through school while supporting their kids or families. They use gig work to support themselves through college.

### MATTHEW RIVALDI

Business and IT faculty member at San Diego Community College

Registration was first come, first served — you had to be in line on registration day. Students were wrapped around several **hallways**.<sup>3</sup>







#### ANDRZEJ KOBYLANSKI

Business faculty member at San Joaquin Delta College

Some students had already done gig work before starting the program: renovating decks, **dog walking**,<sup>4</sup> painting. One was taking pictures for friends' events.

#### RYAN FIERO

Gig economy project coordinator and second-year student at College of the Canyons

One inquiry I often got was about starting an Amazon online business — on Amazon, you can manufacture and sell your own products on the site, though it takes a couple thousand dollars in the beginning. My high school business-law teacher got me interested in it, and I've been doing it for a few years. The key is to not sell what everybody wants to sell — you need to target a very niche market. So I'd help students identify a unique product, then figure out how to manufacture them cheaply outside the country and set up an online presence. The product I chose is an alarm clock that projects the time onto the wall.

#### JOSH DANIELSON

Co-founder of Loconomics, a digital platform for gig and freelance work that partnered with the pilot project

The goal was not just to teach students how to get gig work but to be small-business owners. If you think of yourself only as a gig worker and not a small-business owner, you might end up being taken advantage of.

**JEFFREY FORREST** There is no safety net for those who gig and/or are independent contractors. The legislation has not caught up. We are letting our students know they should not gig unless they can one day earn an income that would provide them with a safety net. To do anything else is to put themselves at economic and personal risk. There's an infographic we use, and we ask them: "How much do you think you need

#### 4 Insights from a 24-year-old with four jobs

##### Health-care-policy researcher

I work for a governmental agency. I've had two temporary contract positions with the state government, and this is my first full-time job. I like the permanence, but state salaries are not as generous as they look on paper. After Medicare and retirement, it comes out to \$36,000 in take-home pay. The Reno housing market is insane, and the cost of living is

going up because it's got Tesla and Amazon and Apple. Pretty soon, it'll look like Menlo Park, but in the desert.

##### House sitter

I used to find house-sitting gigs on Craigslist, and I hope my mom never finds out or else she'll lose her s---. Now it's by word-of-mouth. People will say, "I have a house sitter: She's a young professional who does it for a supplementary income," and people

say, "Cool, I trust this person." People might ask, "We want you to watch our plant and also stay at our house, just in case." I always wonder, *Just in case of what?* Reno is not a very crime-active town. One time, somebody made me watch their tortoise. Sometimes I watch people's mansions, and they don't care what you do, though they for sure have cameras.

##### Dog walker

I find these gigs through Wag or Rover or word-of-mouth. Dog walking scares the s--- out of me. You don't know the dog you're walking, and if another dog approaches, you don't know what that other dog's story is.

##### Grocery-delivery person

The service is called Shipt, and it's my best-kept secret — my friends keep asking me how I do it, but I won't tell them because there aren't enough orders for all of us. If the store doesn't have something the customer ordered, then you text them and say, "We don't have X, but how about this other thing?" Usually the answer is no, since the only people who get groceries delivered are old, and old people know what they like. Or it's people who work at Tesla.

to eventually earn an hour to have a proper safety net?" They'd say, "I don't know, \$15?" We'd say, "You're not even close. It's closer to \$70 an hour."

#### DAVID HEREDIA

Teacher, Business of Freelance course at College of the Canyons

I've told the students: If you're working somewhere you don't enjoy, and you have this fire burning within you to go freelance, you need to have money saved up and a plan. Otherwise, it's dangerous. Because you'll take anything that comes your way.

**JEFFREY FORREST** We ran the program very, very loosely. Freelancers don't want something structured. I'd give out my cell number and email, and if a student had a question about a client, they would text me. I'd tell them, "You priced this service too low," or "Why'd you give the client this turnaround time — you squeezed yourself too thin." They didn't want long conversations or lectures. It's education à la carte.

**RYAN FIERO** Everybody's working nonstop — they're going to school four to five days a week, working part time or full time, and then they come to this program to get a side gig. Everybody wants to make more money.



## Finding the dream job is less of a priority. Having security is.

For those who entered the workforce immediately after 2008, their challenges seemed clear: They were graduating into the worst economy since the Great Depression. But for the people ten years younger, the recession had a quieter effect. "Our past financial **anxiety**' ingrained in us this permanent fear that no matter how well we were doing, the money could disappear at any time," says PJ Harris, who graduated in 2018. "Gen Z saw their parents struggle, their older siblings struggle, and became concerned about their futures," says Sarah Sladek, CEO of a workplace consulting firm, XYZ University. "It prompted the question of, How can I avoid this from happening and ensure I have stability and security in my life?" Three job-seekers — and their mothers — talk about what really matters for the future.

1  
"Some of my friends lost their houses to foreclosure. It was a dark, doomsday feeling. When I was older, my parents had to make me get a credit card. But I was terrified. I was scared of not remembering to pay the monthly payments, or getting stuck with huge bills and having to pay interest."  
— Montana, 23





## The sports writer choosing between his ideal job and the one with better pay

MASON BISSADA, 21

I'm a journalism major. I'd always loved to write, and I was interested in covering sports — specifically basketball. It's the fastest-growing sport in the U.S., and I thought I could find a niche there.

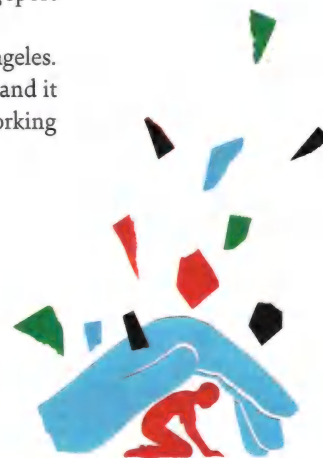
Last summer, I got an internship at a daily newspaper in Los Angeles. It was a big office, but more than half of the desks were empty, and it was very quiet — there was little interaction between people working there. I knew that the industry was shaky, but seeing it firsthand was eye-opening.

I'd been leaning toward PR rather than journalism. Because of how on-the-decline the industry is, I figured I should try something more stable. So after that summer, I reached out to a ton of people on the Clippers organization and ended up getting coffee with their media executive. Six months later, he asked me to be their in-house beat reporter during my winter break. I'd write game recaps and player profiles for their website. It was my dream job except that I was working for a team rather than a publication, so everything had to have a positive spin.

What I'm grappling with every day now is which career to choose. I want to know that I'm going to be stable. One day I want to have a family, and I don't want to have to worry if my job will be there when I wake up, or if my company will go under.

I was 11 during the '08 crisis, and I remember seeing a lot of stuff on the news. I saw a lot of teachers get laid off. My mom makes decent money. We have a house in the San Fernando Valley, and she owns a salon and cuts hair. Luckily, people still needed haircuts, so my mom noticed a difference but wasn't too affected by it, as far as I know.

People my age are realistic. That's what happens when you're raised by people telling you if you put in effort, do your best, results will come. Our generation has become disillusioned to that idea of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. It's wishful thinking. You could try your hardest and put in the work and the effort and get an education and get good grades, but you can still fail.



### A RESPONSE FROM MASON'S MOTHER, LORI BISSADA

I've run my salon for 17 years. In 2008, work was slow, and we cut back. I worried, but there was some leeway. I've never gotten the same paycheck every week, so I knew: If the money's not there, you can't spend it. Mason was 11 then. I hope I never portrayed worry to him about finances. It was also around this time that his dad and I divorced. Mason was mature and intuitive, and I think that scared him. From then on,

**I always told him: "We're fine. I've got your back. You're never going to be homeless. You're going to stay in this house."**

Mason's a very responsible and money-conscious person, but I think that's a fear of his. When he was a kid, I always had to tell him to relax and have fun. I'm not kidding. I'd say to him, "If you don't have tests and things are good with school, take today off and let's go skiing." I have to wring into him the idea: "Just do life." I don't think he's extremely special in this regard: Most kids in that generation feel stressed.

I want Mason to find a balance between financial stability and taking risks. I hope he's secure enough to go out and take those risks — to know that, if he does fall, there are people around him, that he can pick himself back up. The money will follow somehow.

→

LEFT  
Mason Bissada in  
the hallways of San  
Francisco State  
University, where he's  
currently a student

BELOW  
Mason's mother,  
Lori, at her salon,  
Strands and Hands





## The college senior who prioritizes homeownership over job satisfaction

CHLOE, 22

My great-grandmother grew up in Louisiana and moved out here to San Francisco. She was a single black woman, a mom of two, and she bought a duplex for \$40,000. It was sold in 2016 for \$2 million. Seeing how she could save money to buy a house and create generational wealth — that's something I want to do as well. I'm minoring in urban planning so that I can know how urban policy works, and so I can be prepared to buy property. Because if I buy property before I'm 30, maybe I can turn it into an income property.

The financial market will drop again in my lifetime. I don't want that anxiety, and if I can do anything to avoid it, I will. I didn't know the full extent of the collapse, but I remember the \$5 gas prices in the Bay Area, and I do remember our parents saying we might have to start carpooling, and I remember asking for less and getting less for Christmas. My mom got laid off around the time of the financial crisis. Things got a lot tighter.

I came into school with a partial athletic scholarship, which covered tuition and books. When I graduate, I'll have to pay \$12,000 in loans, which isn't crazy in the scheme of things. I want to find a job soon because my mom keeps telling me she's not going to pay for anything after I graduate. I thought she was maybe joking, and if I kept bringing it up, she'd say something different. But she hasn't yet. I don't want to get an apartment and get evicted, or ruin my credit score. My credit score is very important to me. If I have to have an unfavorable job and have over 700 on my credit, I'll be OK.

### A RESPONSE FROM CHLOE'S MOTHER, GINA

My grandmother, Chloe's great-grandmother, purchased a duplex in what used to be the Western Addition neighborhood of San Francisco. She purchased that piece of property so her family would always have a place to live. That was her motivation — the idea that it might generate wealth would've been beyond her wildest dreams. There was a time when my mom, brother, and I lived in one of the units, and my grandmother's other daughter lived in the other with her family. In 1971, my mother, an entry-level administrative clerk, and her husband purchased a home in Richmond, California. Five years later, she was a divorced woman, working for little money, but was determined to hold onto that house.

Chloe's dad and I purchased our first home in 1994. After we divorced, it was heartbreaking to go back to being a renter. Chloe would've been starting high school. That's when I started telling her about homeownership — that you don't want to throw away rent, that you need to build credit. A home is more than a place to live: It's a way to gain equity, build your finances. In 2006, I was laid off but had a severance that was 70 percent of what my salary was. Later on, one thing I explained to Chloe was that, prior to 2006, we were living beyond our means. We wanted to have Warriors tickets and buy nice cars and pay for private school. We had to tighten our belts. Since then, we've had conversations about it, and she must have felt the dynamics.

My mother did not have these conversations with me, and I wished someone had when I was younger. I'd tell Chloe: **If you want to control your financial**

**future — so you're not tied to employment and have something else you can fall back on — you can own property.** I have an older son, but Chloe paid more

attention. It's always been the females in my family to take ownership, and she wants to continue that legacy.



**The high school senior  
who wants to avoid debt by  
any means necessary**

GABBY AYALA, 18

In middle school, my Spanish teacher gave us a lecture on how much student debt she had and how she was struggling to pay it off. She was 40 and still had these huge monthly payments, and she told us about how the interest was killing her. I realized I didn't want to be in that rat race of drowning in debt. This might sound greedy, but my first priority for finding a job is: Does it pay enough for me to live where I want to live and do what I want to do? I don't want to leave Colorado. I never get lost with the mountains nearby, and I want to stay where I don't get lost. Quite a few people are moving in, and the cost of living has risen, and I want to be prepared. My family has struggled financially — wondering whether we can make the next house payment or electricity bill. My mom has been a barista at Starbucks for 15 years. To watch her do that — I didn't want her to go through that anymore.

I got interested in coding in middle school but didn't have a sense of how strong a career it was. I went to a computer science high school, and freshman year they told us: Here are all the amazing jobs you can have; here's what they pay you. I thought, *This seems like a good plan — I'll go for it.* Then in tenth grade, a local apprenticeship program came to my school to recruit students. They told us we could get up to two years of college credit, and I was really down with that. You go to high school a few mornings a week, take college classes, and spend a few days working with a company in Denver. I'm in the third year of my apprenticeship at Pinnacol Assurance, a workers' comp insurance company, and I'm doing work in IT and web development.

At the end of my apprenticeship, I might have the option to work for Pinnacol full time, instead of going to college, if they hire me. I'd be perfectly fine with that.



Gabby Ayala  
and her mother,  
Jean, at the  
Pinnacol offices

**A RESPONSE FROM GABBY'S MOTHER, JEAN AYALA**

I started talking to Gabby about money when she was 6 years old. I put in her mind that she was going to go to college, get a good job, and wouldn't have to have the same struggles I did. I'm a Starbucks manager in a Safeway, and it's not always the easiest job. I want her to have a comfortable, reliable job that isn't in retail. A job in which she gets weekends off and can plan for the future a little better. Gabby's always seen me on a budget, figuring out what I could do to make the money stretch. She's the oldest of three siblings, and I'm a single mother, so if I wasn't there, she'd help me out.

As Gabby grew older, the conversation about money became more detailed. Right before she found the apprenticeship program, when she was 15, she came home and said, "I'm going to find a way to go to college to not hurt your budget. You have three kids, and I'll find a way that won't add stress to you." **I never**

**want to instill my fears and doubts into my kids. Sometimes as parents, we don't realize we're nudging our kids to be more like us.**

As a teenager, I worked at an ice cream shop in the airport, and it drove me crazy when mothers asked their child what they want, and the kid couldn't figure it out. I always thought, *I'm not going to let my kids be like that. They're going to know what they want, and they're going to know how to go after it.*





## Some are skipping college altogether to start earning sooner.

In 2016, James Boyd was deciding whether or not to finish his bachelor's degree in psychology. He found his major interesting but wasn't sure what it would lead to. And there was the \$19,000 he owed in student loans. "I decided to cut my losses and work and pay back what I owe." James enrolled in a local job corps program, where he's being groomed for the automotive trade.

Of today's new graduates, "there's a generational awareness that college degrees don't pay off," says Matt Sigelman, CEO of Burning Glass, a job-market analytics firm. "When more people start earning a degree, employers stop attaching as much value to it." Bachelor's degrees can lead to better earnings over the long run, of course, but many feel they cannot afford to wait. James has a job lined up in Klamath Falls, Oregon, after which his plan is to save up so he can strike out on his own. Meanwhile, families and school districts across the country are beginning to look for potentially higher-return alternatives. Below, a by-the-numbers look at how the calculus of college is changing.

For the first time this year, the average in-state tuition at a public, four-year college surpassed

**\$10,000**

Average annual expenses with room and board?

**> \$20,000**

The number of years it takes the average college student to get a degree

**5**

40% still don't have one after six years.

According to a national survey of 2017 graduates with bachelor's degrees, the average starting salary was

**\$50,359**

For 2015 grads, it was \$50,219, an uptick of less than 0.3% over two years. But last year alone, inflation rose 2.9%.

The second-largest source of debt in the country:

The first source: home mortgages

**\$1,569,300,000,000**

in outstanding federal and private student loans.

In the past few years, universities have begun devising ways of helping students finance their educations. Some students at Purdue University, for example, have turned themselves into stock investments: Instead of taking out loans, they agree to hand over part of their future earnings.

The unemployment rate for college graduates between the ages of 22 and 27 is

**3.7%**

The number of recent college graduates who are underemployed — or working in a job that doesn't require their degree

**41%**

Since 2013, the number of trade apprenticeship programs has grown by

**56%**

In Florida (one of the only states that tracks such outcomes), median first-year wages for workers in trade apprenticeships were between

**\$40,000 – \$55,000**

Compared to only \$34,000 for people with bachelor's degrees

The marketing agency Sparks and Honey found that

**75%**

of people in Gen Z say there are other ways of getting a good education than going to college.

## Others are rejecting the cult of the 24/7 workday.

When you enter the word "passionate" in the job search engine Indeed, it yields 345,000 results, 224,000 of which are entry-level: A seasonal warehouse associate, a content creator, and a full-stack developer all seem to require a minimum level of devotion. According to Cal Newport, a professor and author of the book *Deep Work*, the phrase "follow your passion" emerged as a popular career slogan in the 1990s and skyrocketed in the 2000s — giving rise to the "toil glamour" that has become mainstream (#ThankGodIt'sMonday, #riseandgrind). "The pressure to hustle comes from every angle," says Armaan Malde, a 22-year-old engineering student. "You need to get good grades so you can find a good job — there's a lot of uncertainty on whether that can happen. And if you're coming out of school with loans, you need to find a job that pays enough." But within a modern work culture that demands all of one's attention, some are finding ways — even if temporarily — to reclaim their time.





### The 25-year-old who uses two phones

The lack of worker protections leads to us all being on edge about having a job. There's no bar by which you can say you've done enough. It's like, *Have I done enough work? Am I succeeding?* And in a lot of tech or corporate jobs, your personal and work life converge because you're expected to always be on demand.

I've learned to unwind my work from my life and my ego, and I actively take steps to prevent myself from working too hard. When I first started working as a software engineer, I used one phone and one laptop for both home and work. Later, I went out and bought a second phone and computer. I wanted a wall between my personal world and work world. On my personal phone, I installed only the things I'd want to use at home: some communication apps, YouTube, Spotify. Not my work email account. Setting up my personal phone was nice — it felt like moving. And on my home laptop, I'm only logged in on my personal email and some personal Slack channels. When it's time to go home, I leave my work devices at the office. I am not a wellspring of infinite energy.

### The 23-year-old who pretends to do paperwork

When I first started to look for jobs, my expectations of "I hope I get a job that I love!" flew out of the window. I was seeing all these positions where you're expected to collapse your whole life into your job, and I avoided them. I wanted to guard my time outside of work.

I'm one of the only people at my work who doesn't harbor any guilt about working as little as possible. In fact, I advocate for stealing as much time and money from your employer as you can. Sometimes at my desk, I take an hour to read and pretend to be looking at paperwork. It's almost like hiding a comic book inside a textbook: I'll have reimbursement paperwork in one hand and a novel in my other hand, and if people walk by, I'll just cover up the book. I work with so many people who don't want to leave their desks too long, or who work through lunch. I don't think that the reason they're not taking lunch is because they really care that this reimbursement goes out tomorrow or the next day — they just feel like they have to do really well at their job. But you can do mediocre at your job, and that's fine.

There are these corporate buzzwords people use to describe work, like, *We're this community of people, we all love each other*. It feels like a tactic to make work feel like a fun place where you hang out with friends. But they're just trying to get as much labor out of you as possible. They want you to give up a lot of your time and to do so enthusiastically. I'm at work from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, and I don't think that everybody should have to be at their job that much.

### The 22-year-old who pads his hours

At our company, you have to log every minute you work in 15-minute intervals, and there are codes for how you spend your time: meetings, customer support, education. You pick your code, add a description of the task and the time you spent: "Customer Support, helped them on this issue, two hours." At the end of every week, you have to make sure it adds up to 40 hours, and that's how



management makes sure your hours are in line with what they want.

In college, you were always competing to be busy — it's a flex. You flex on people about how little you slept, how many clubs you're in. The way you get validation isn't by producing the best results — it's by putting in the most visible work. You carry that into the real world. You have to outwork everyone else because you don't want to be seen as a slacker.

When I log my hours every week, I just straight-up pad it. I've always done it. I pad it to make it look like the schedule of somebody with a full workload because I'm not trying to work more. When my manager asks me how things are going, I always give a neutral response: I have enough work, not unhappy and not happy. I don't want to seem overworked or underworked. I kind of just exist there. It's a place for me to make money. My company bleeds its employees dry. Management could hire a lot more people, but they know that these people can handle it for a year or two, and once they burn out, they're replaced by a fresh set. It's a big meat grinder. A lot of my friends work 50 to 60 hours a week because they're given that much work. But I say, you owe the company the 40 hours they pay you for and nothing else. \$







Un

# The knowable Kamala Harris

The complicated career  
of a self-proclaimed  
progressive prosecutor  
By Nicole Allan

Artwork by  
David Samuel Stern

On April 10, 2004, Kamala Harris was in her fourth month as San Francisco's district attorney. It was a Saturday, the day before Easter. Having prosecuted homicides in Oakland and major crimes in San Francisco, Harris knew the drill: You kept your phone on when you went home Friday night and hoped it didn't ring. If it did, it was bad news.

Late that Saturday night, Harris's phone rang. There had been a fatal shooting in the Bayview. That was not a surprise: The neighborhood was (and remains) one of San Francisco's most dangerous. What was a surprise was the victim — Isaac Espinoza, a 29-year-old cop.

Harris, who lived in a loft in SoMa, the gentrifying area near downtown, rushed to meet her team. She knew the Bayview well — it was where she'd headquartered her campaign for DA the year before. It had been an unconventional choice, but one she'd insisted on as a way of signaling support for the troubled neighborhood. That night, the Bayview station was swarmed with police and investigators while Harris worked with her homicide unit.

Today, Harris is a California senator and a top-tier candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination. But just a year before she was elected DA, only a small fraction of San Franciscans knew her name. She'd campaigned as an underdog for the role of district attorney, going up against incumbent Terence Hallinan and Bill Fazio, another, better-known prosecutor. Hallinan, who was serving his second term, represented the city's ambivalent relationship with law enforcement: His background was as a defense



attorney. When he took office in 1996, he had never prosecuted a case.

Harris, by contrast, had served as a prosecutor in Oakland straight out of the University of California's Hastings College of the Law. She rotated through the Alameda County District Attorney's Office, working on misdemeanors and preliminary hearings before eventually moving up to felonies.

"She was tremendous in the courtroom," says Allison Danzig, who started in the Oakland office with Harris. "She had enormous confidence and skill in front of the jury — and charisma, which is not a surprise now, of course." Danzig describes Harris as direct and forceful, not too formal. "She was very natural. The image she projected in the courtroom was exactly the same person I knew outside the courtroom."

Harris was drawn to sexual-assault cases, which are notoriously difficult to prosecute. Jill Nerone, who started her felony-trial rotation on the same day as Harris and later shared an office with her, remembers that if Harris interviewed a victim and believed her, she'd take on the case even if there was scant evidence. "There's a lot of people who would shy away from those cases, but never Kamala," Nerone says.

Harris's ambition was clear, remembers Terry Wiley, who also started in Oakland around the same time as Harris. The Alameda County DA's Office was top-heavy at that time, so Harris moved across the bay to run San Francisco's career-criminal unit under Hallinan. She'd known that the office's numbers were poor — relatively few convictions, lots of unsolved homicides — and she quickly learned why. In addition to a backstabbing culture, the office had a shortage of phones and computers; prosecutors didn't have email. She stayed for a year and a half before moving to the San Francisco City Attorney's Office, where she was better positioned to plan a run against Hallinan.

Harris, who grew up in what was then a working-class neighborhood on the border of Berkeley and Oakland, had spent years cultivating her political network, serving on the state's Medical Assistance Commission and

Unemployment Insurance Appeals Board as well as the board of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. She was as comfortable in the city's old-money stomping grounds as in its black and brown neighborhoods. This network paid off in just over a million dollars of fundraising.

Harris presented herself as a more competent alternative to Hallinan — someone who'd spent years in the courtroom

**In Harris's first campaign for attorney general, she ran on being a different kind of prosecutor:**

and the community and would be able to implement the empathic approach to prosecution that Hallinan merely talked about. During her campaign, she spoke frequently about her opposition to the death penalty. So did both of her opponents. In a town where a vast majority of residents opposed capital punishment, this position was essentially required of anyone running for district attorney.

When she took office in January 2004, she followed through on the competence: Phones were acquired; offices were painted; standing meetings were scheduled. But Espinoza's death was Harris's first real test. San Francisco hadn't had a cop killing in ten years.

By the following afternoon, investigators had homed in on a suspect. David Hill, who was 21, had grown up in the projects in Hunters Point, next to the Bayview, and had been caught up in gang activity since his early teens. He and Espinoza, who had spent years working in the Bayview, had crossed paths before. Espinoza's partner told investigators that shortly after 9:30 that night, Espinoza had approached Hill on the street, suspecting he had a gun. Hill walked away at first, then turned and fired 14 rounds at Espinoza with an AK-47. Once Hill was in custody, Harris knew that everyone was waiting for her to announce whether she would seek the death penalty. State law authorized execution for someone who knowingly killed an on-duty officer.

Many California district attorneys' offices at that time had set processes for determining whether to seek the death penalty. Contra Costa County, for example, assembled a committee of lawyers to evaluate arguments for and against, asking the defense attorney for mitigating evidence and consulting the victim's family. Hill was arrested at 3:30 p.m. on Easter Sunday. On Tuesday, Harris announced her decision: She would be seeking life without parole.

The outcry was swift. The police union, which had supported her during her campaign, became a vocal and increasingly hostile critic. The case got national attention, which built to a head at Espinoza's memorial service that Friday. Police blocked traffic around St. Mary's Cathedral, a white spaceship of a church on a hill in the middle of the

city. At 8:45 a.m., thousands of uniformed officers gathered in the plaza outside. The city and state political elite turned out en masse: city supervisors, Mayor Gavin Newsom, Senator Dianne Feinstein, state Attorney General Bill Lockyer. Harris mingled with the mourners before the service, greeting Feinstein, who had endorsed her campaign for DA.

Inside the modernist sanctuary, Harris settled in the first pew. Espinoza's wife and 3-year-old daughter were nearby. In addition to Newsom, the police chief, and the Bayview station chief, Feinstein addressed the crowd. She had been pushing an assault-weapons ban in Congress, so people were expecting her to focus on the need to keep AK-47s off the street. Instead, she called the crime "the definition of

**one who didn't have to choose between being "tough on crime" and being socially conscious,**

tragedy," deserving of the death penalty. The audience roared to its feet. Harris stayed seated.

"It sucked the energy out of the room," remembers Lockyer. The president of the police union spoke after Feinstein, reiterating her call for the death penalty and earning another round of applause. As Feinstein left, she reportedly said that she would not have endorsed Harris if she'd known Harris opposed the death penalty.

Tim Silard, Harris's chief of policy at the time, remembers Harris returning to the office after the service. "She was pretty stunned," he says. "For prosecutors, we spend our careers working with police officers. These are our colleagues — it isn't some abstraction. So the implication that she didn't care about the death of this officer was very disturbing to all of



us.” Harris’s communications team did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

The pressure intensified in the weeks following. The police chief circulated a letter urging Harris to change her decision; rank-and-file officers rallied outside the DA’s office; Senator Barbara Boxer urged the U.S. attorney to consider prosecuting the case. Lockyer says that he told Harris his office would need to remove the case from her unless she was able to back up her decision with a factual investigation. “To the extent that her decision was a practical one — mainly

**but who was  
instead “smart  
on crime.”**

that it would be virtually impossible to get a death-penalty conviction in San Francisco — that’s a reasonable basis for a charging decision,” Lockyer says. “But at least in the comments she made, it was more philosophical.”

Lockyer’s office did not end up removing the case, and Harris’s team secured a conviction for second-degree murder and a sentence of life without parole. She published an op-ed in the *San Francisco Chronicle* two weeks after Espinoza’s murder, defending her decision. “From my career in law enforcement and the law, it is clear to me that the death penalty is deeply flawed,” Harris wrote, citing studies showing that it is applied disproportionately, does not deter crime, and costs a huge amount of money that could in fact be used to deter crime. “As a civilized society, are we going to say that we’re going to kill somebody for killing somebody as punishment?” she asked the paper in a separate interview.

While the furor continues to follow her — a former high-ranking San Francisco cop told me that the local police union “will not be endorsing Kamala Harris for president, let’s put it that way” — the incident also built her

credibility in some circles. John Nauer, a Bayview native Harris later hired to run a violence-intervention program in the neighborhood, which had an especially strained relationship with law enforcement at that time, notes that Espinoza’s murder was set against a backdrop of regular homicides of young men of color. “A lot of folks were like, ‘Wow, we’re idolizing this individual, but what about all the other people who passed away?’” Nauer says.

“I think many people would say that was a courageous stance to take, because most people think a politician cannot survive if they’re going to be opposed to the death penalty, especially when it comes to a cop killer,” says Laurie Levenson, a professor at Loyola Law School and an expert in wrongful convictions. “So I do give her credit for that. She stood by her principles.”

Then, ten years after the Espinoza case, Harris again found herself facing a high-profile decision on the death penalty. She was California attorney general at this point, actively campaigning for reelection. In July 2014, Cormac Carney, a federal judge in Orange County, ruled that California’s death-penalty system was unconstitutional. Capital prisoners were waiting so long for execution, Carney wrote, that their sentences had become “life in prison, with the remote possibility of death” — an uncertainty tantamount to cruel and unusual punishment.

The case made national headlines and energized opponents of capital punishment. While the Supreme Court has consistently upheld the death penalty, this particular argument against it was new. “Anyone who is opposed to the death penalty was excited to see the federal court speak in such frank terms about the unquestionably broken death-penalty system in California,” says Cassandra Stubbs, director of the ACLU Capital Punishment Project.

But rather than letting Carney’s ruling stand, Harris decided to appeal the case to the Ninth Circuit, which over-

**The past few years, however,  
have brought a wholesale  
rethinking of prosecution.**

ruled it. At the time, she said she was appealing because the decision was “not supported by the law” and “undermines important protections that our courts provide to defendants.” Lawyers who were involved with and observing the case did not know what she meant by this, and she did not explain it further. “That made absolutely no sense to me, as to what she was saying she was protecting,” says a capital-defense attorney who tracked the case closely.

“To me, one of the most interesting aspects of elected office is deciding when you have representative responsibility and when you should lead,” says former Attorney General Lockyer. In 2008, then-Attorney General Jerry

Brown announced that he would not defend Proposition 8, the California voter initiative banning gay marriage. When Harris took over from Brown in 2011, she stuck by his decision, helping to sink the proposition and build momentum toward the Supreme Court’s 2015 opinion legalizing same-sex marriage. Had she made a similar choice on the Judge Carney case, Stubbs says, “I think there’s a good chance that would have been the end of the death penalty in California.”

By this point, Harris’s decision did not surprise many of her longtime observers. A couple years earlier, she’d declined to take a position on a ballot initiative that would have repealed the state’s death penalty, claiming that she needed to remain neutral because her office produced the summaries for ballot initiatives. But this hadn’t stopped almost all other California attorneys general from taking such positions.

In the decade since Harris had first been elected DA, she had built a reputation as a careful politician with an eye on the next office. While her choice not to seek the death penalty for David Hill antagonized law enforcement, it was supported by about 70 percent of San Franciscans, who would ultimately elect her to a second term. By the time she appealed Judge Carney’s decision, however, she was representing a much more diverse group of statewide voters — and actively soliciting them for reelection.

In Harris’s first campaign for attorney general, she ran on being a different kind of prosecutor: one who didn’t have to choose between being “tough on crime” and being socially conscious, but who was instead “smart on crime.” The past few years, however, have brought a wholesale rethinking of prosecution. District attorneys like Larry Krasner in Philadelphia and Kim Foxx in Chicago have successfully run as “progressive prosecutors,” taking comparatively radical steps such as scaling back cash bail and declining to prosecute low-level drug offenses.

Now Harris, playing to a Democratic primary electorate that is demanding increasingly progressive ideas, is seeking to align herself with this movement. “My vision of a progressive prosecutor,” she writes in *The*



*Truths We Hold*, her 2019 memoir, “was someone who used the power of the office with a sense of fairness, perspective, and experience, someone who was clear about the need to hold serious criminals accountable and who understood that the best way to create safe communities was to prevent crime in the first place.”

Harris’s crime-prevention focus was relatively rare at the time she was district attorney, when most of her counterparts were still riding the law-and-order wave of the 1990s. Her work on diversion and reentry — such as her Back on Track program, a widely lauded reentry initiative for young people arrested for low-level, first-time drug offenses — can be seen as a precursor to some of the approaches taken by today’s progressive prosecutors. But while these prosecutors are

**She had built  
a reputation as  
a careful  
politician**

attempting to overturn the status quo, Harris has consistently defended it. While they are trying to shrink the role of the office, she has expanded it.

In March, struggling to prove her progressive bona fides, Harris was one of the first to express support when Governor Gavin Newsom put a moratorium on the death penalty during his tenure. She issued a press release pointing to her own opposition “throughout her career in law enforcement.”

**A COUPLE OF YEARS** into Harris’s first term as San Francisco district attorney, she happened upon a statistic: 94 percent of San Francisco homicide victims and perpetrators younger than 25 were high school dropouts. In the preceding years, Harris and the police had struggled to get a handle on the homicide rate; countless crimes remained unsolved because her office couldn’t

convince witnesses in gang-dominated neighborhoods to come forward.

Stymied when it came to prosecuting crime, Harris turned her attention to trying to prevent it. One of her first targets was an unlikely demographic: elementary school kids and their parents. “We went to the school district,” says Silard, Harris’s then-policy chief, “and they looked back at the records and found that all of these folks, well before dropping out of high school, had been chronically truant.” And not just in high school — the data showed that these students had missed large portions of elementary school.

Here was a problem that felt more solvable than convincing gang members to testify against one another. Harris decided to try to stop young people from joining gangs and committing crimes in the first place. She and Silard considered their options. Their initial conversations with the San Francisco school district were not productive. “My opinion, frankly, is that for some people within the education systems, not having to deal with some of these kids is not something they’re sad about,” says Silard, who now runs the Rosenberg Foundation, a racial- and economic-justice organization based in San Francisco. “They’re not necessarily taking big efforts to keep these kids in school.”

At the time, California law contained a civil infraction, akin to a traffic ticket, for parents whose kids missed a certain number of days of

**with an eye on  
the next office.**

school, with a maximum fine of \$100 and no jail time. Some counties also charged these parents with a criminal misdemeanor for “contributing to the delinquency of a minor,” which carried a fine of up to \$2,500 and as much as a year in jail. Harris decided to threaten to enforce these penalties

to get foot-dragging parents to pay attention — and to prosecute if they didn’t.

She announced the policy at a meeting in the DA’s office, remembers Keith Choy, who was working as the district’s stay-in-school coordinator. The room was filled with school principals and administrators, school-board members, and representatives from the police and health departments, Choy says. As Harris describes the meeting in her first book, *Smart on Crime*, the audience “erupted” when she announced her plan — half “sneered and were visibly upset,” while “the other half clapped and cheered out loud.”

“People were pushing back,” Choy confirms. “The big concern was, *How can you jail parents and kids for truancy in San Francisco?* Nobody ever said it out loud like that. But it was like, *Hey, we’re The City. We don’t do that.*”

Harris, however, remained committed to the plan. “The idea was not to be punitive,” Silard explains, “but to connect parents to the kind of support they needed to get their kids to school.”

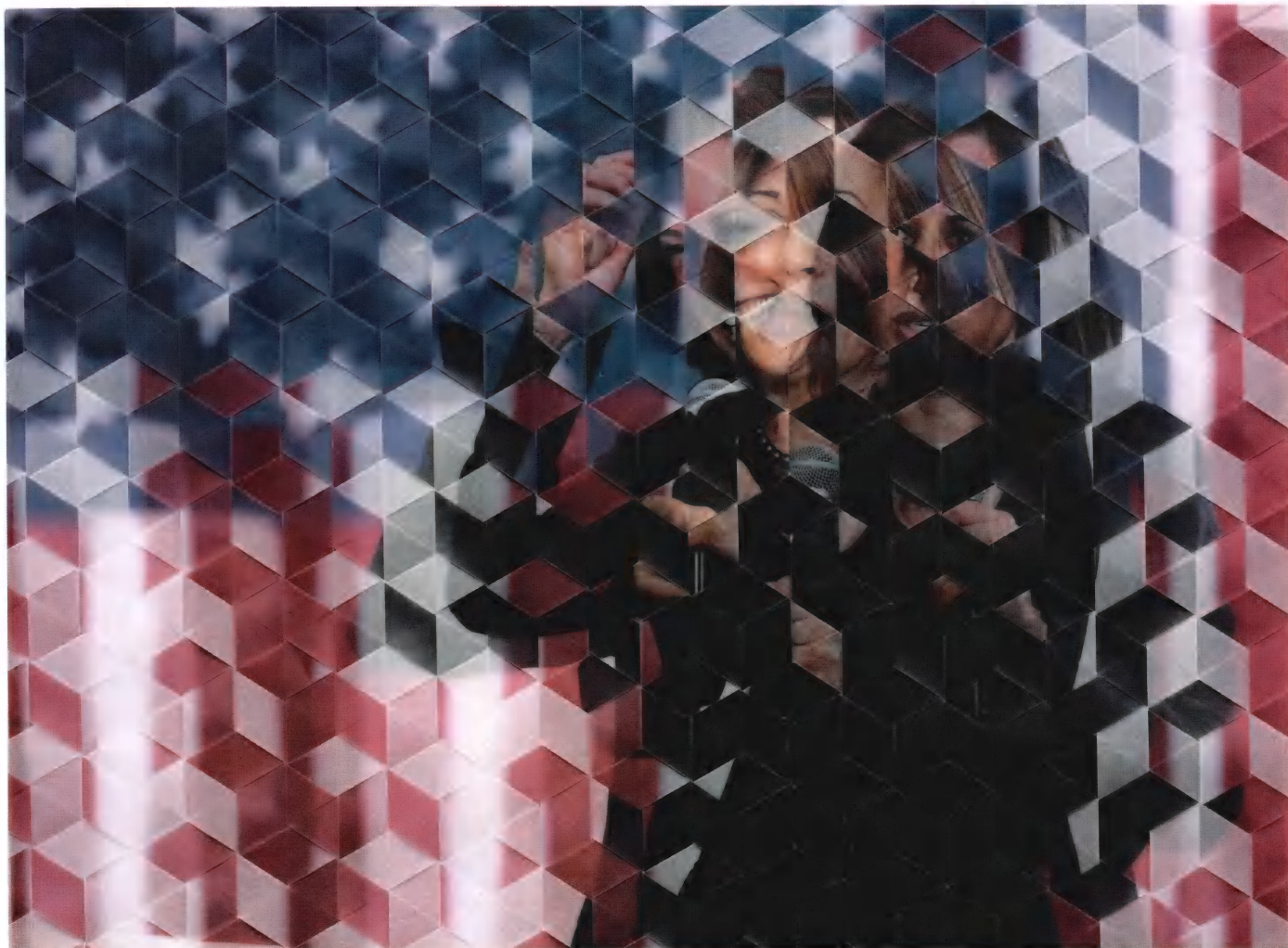
Under the program, parents received a letter on DA letterhead at the beginning of the school year informing them that truancy was a crime and listing the number for a city hotline if they needed help getting their kids to school. Parents were notified when their children had more than 20 unexcused absences. School administrators pulled them into a series of meetings at which they were offered various forms of assistance: busing, child care for other kids, transfers to more-convenient schools. At some of these meetings, an assistant DA would sit in the room, symbolizing the potential for legal consequences. “It was a carrot-and-a-stick meeting,” explains Choy.

In concert with Donna Hitchens, a longtime San Francisco judge who had overhauled the county’s family court, Harris and her team set up a special truancy court for families who did not respond to earlier interventions. Before Hitchens called each case, a social worker would meet with the parents, almost none of whom could afford lawyers. An assistant DA was always present, and hanging over every proceeding was the fact that the city could always attempt to remove the child from the family. Hitchens says that most parents were concerned and embarrassed. “They really wanted their children to be in school,” she says.

In the program’s first two years, seven families were taken to court, and chronic and habitual truancy among elementary school students dropped by 23 percent. Katherine Weinstein Miller, who currently oversees the district attorney’s involvement in the program and has worked on it since 2007, could not provide additional data, but she estimates that 25 or so families are taken to court each year. Miller says the office has only ever charged infractions.

Harris’s approach to truancy was controversial when it began, and it remains so today. In her first book, Harris admits that even her staff “winced” when she decided to take on the issue. “I recognized that the school system might





be outside my jurisdiction as District Attorney, but I also realized that I was in a unique position to bring a new kind of accountability to this problem,” she writes. This is partly what Harris means when she describes herself today as a progressive prosecutor — someone who enlarges the prosecutor’s traditional mandate.

While she was campaigning for attorney general in 2010, Harris advocated for a new state law based on her efforts in San Francisco. The law created a criminal misdemeanor charge for parents of habitually truant kids, carrying a maximum fine of \$2,000 and jail time of up to a year and laying out an optional model for collaborative truancy courts. While San

Francisco has not charged any parents under the new law, other counties have. In a report Harris commissioned in 2013, district attorneys statewide reported prosecuting an average of three to six of the misdemeanors per year, and at least a few parents have gone to jail as a result.

In an April interview with the podcast *Pod Save America*, Harris expressed regret over how the law had been applied in these cases, calling them “unintended consequences.” “The thought that anything that I did could have led to that, because that certainly was not the intention ... it never was the intention,” Harris said.

This apology, however, strikes some as disingenuous. “You can draw a straight line from including in the penal code a jail penalty and the fact that it is an intended consequence,” says a juvenile-justice advocate who worked with San Francisco families experiencing chronic truancy. And while there is no statewide data on how truancy laws are enforced, there is reason to believe that families of color have been disproportionately prosecuted. According to

data that Harris collected after she became attorney general, black, Native American, and Pacific Islander students have significantly higher truancy rates than other students. The same is true for foster youth, homeless students, and students with disabilities. The juvenile-justice advocate points to this data to suggest that there are other government departments that would be better suited to addressing truancy than the DA’s office. While she appreciates that Harris brought attention to a largely ignored problem, she says, “We do not need the long arm of the law to come in, because it lets these other systems off the hook.”

Defenders of Harris’s approach point out that those systems were



not solving the problem. "The intent was to use the courtroom setting to provide accountability for parents and for various systems that were failing parents," Silard says.

Even in the glare of a national campaign, Harris remains proud of the program. In an interview with *The Root* this February, she said, "When I did it, I knew I was going to take a political hit. And the people around me said, 'Don't do it, because you are going to pay a price for this in terms of whatever future you want in politics.' And I said, 'Look, I'm prepared to play the bad guy on this. I do not intend to put any parent in jail.'"

**GEORGE GASCÓN** was in his first few weeks as chief of the San Francisco Police Department in September 2009 when he stumbled upon something alarming. He was going through disciplinary cases for San Francisco police officers and mentioned to some of his staff that an officer's file should be evaluated for Brady purposes. His staff members stared at him blankly.

*Brady v. Maryland*, a 1963 Supreme Court case, requires prosecutors to hand exculpatory evidence over to the defense. Gascón, who is a lawyer himself and ended up succeeding Harris as San Francisco's district attorney, knew that this obligation extended to the police. When an officer who has previously been disciplined by his department testifies in a case — about his observations of a crime scene, say, or his analysis of forensic evidence — a defense attorney can use that fact to call his credibility into question. So Gascón was wondering what the department's

policy was for determining whether this officer's file should be given to defense attorneys.

He had handled the aftermath of this issue as an officer in the Los Angeles Police Department, when it was engulfed in what became known as the Rampart scandal. One of the biggest scandals in a police department known for them, it involved more than 70 cops who had helped frame, beat, and shoot suspects, steal drugs, and commit various other misdeeds. Several of these officers had testified in trials even after the department became aware of their behavior, but no one had





told the defense about it. The scandal ended up leading to the reversal of more than a hundred convictions.

Steve Cooley, who took over the L.A. district attorney's office mid-Rampart scandal, designed and implemented California's first disclosure policy for this kind of evidence. By the time Gascón took over the SFPD, this sort of policy was considered best practice. His officers, however, told him that San Francisco did not have such a policy. (Most DAs in California at this time did not.) He raised the issue with Harris, who was in the midst of her first campaign for attorney general, and she agreed to draft a policy. But it would ultimately take a public shaming by a judge and the press for her to do so.

By March of the following year, it became clear that Harris had not drafted a policy. Gascón abruptly closed the SFPD crime lab because a technician named Deborah Madden had allegedly been skimming drugs for her

own use, going back no one knew how long. Not only that, but Madden had been convicted of a domestic-violence misdemeanor in 2008 and had sought treatment for alcohol abuse. Her SFPD disciplinary file had a Post-It note on it that read "Brady Implications." Meanwhile, she'd been testifying in hundreds of cases involving drug evidence — but no one had informed defense attorneys in any of these cases about either issue.

Gascón ordered an audit of the lab, and defendants in cases Madden had worked on began trying to get them dismissed. It came out that Harris's head narcotics prosecutor had sent Harris's deputy, Russ Giuntini, a memo in November alerting him to her concerns about the lab and about Madden in particular. Harris claims that she did not learn about the issues until the following February. Giuntini left the DA's office after the scandal broke and did not respond to requests for comment.

But Harris soon had a bigger problem. Reporting on the Madden case revealed that her prosecutors had failed to tell defense attorneys in potentially hundreds of other cases about police witnesses with disciplinary records.

When defending this conduct in court, Harris's office blamed the police for not bringing the records to prosecutors' attention. The judge rejected this argument, accusing Harris's office of a "level of indifference" to inquiries about whether it had a policy in place and noting that Harris "had a duty to implement some type of procedure... to ascertain and disclose criminal convictions of SFPD employees." The judge urged Harris to "be more mindful, going forward, of this obligation to due process." Harris's office later argued that the judge had been biased because her husband, an attorney, had a client who'd been affected by the Madden scandal. An independent judge denied the claim.

Harris's office ended up dismissing approximately a thousand cases, from low-level possession charges to high-level trafficking. As case after case got dismissed, cheering erupted in the courthouse

halls. "I don't think another DA would have dismissed as many cases," says Chris Gauger, a San Francisco pub-

**"She says all the right things — frankly, all the right platitudes — about criminal-justice reform."**

lic defender who worked on some of the cases. "She fought certain things hard, but when her back was to the wall and it was time for trial, she'd dismiss the cases."

Harris also assembled a team of her top deputies and a premier San Francisco defense attorney to create policies for surfacing and disclosing evidence of police misconduct. "It's fair to say that we took a crisis and turned it into an opportunity," says Jerry Coleman, whom Harris tapped to help write the policies. "That opportunity was to create the most progressive policy in the state."

But to many observers, these actions were too little, too late. Brady is a proxy for prosecutorial conscience — a rule for when nobody's watching. "You've got with her on Brady a combination of very questionable decisions in particular cases and, from what I can tell, no programmatic leadership at all," says Robert Weisberg, a professor at Stanford Law School and an expert in criminal justice. "She says all the right things — frankly, all the right platitudes — about criminal-justice reform. But she tends to lead from behind and wait until she sees the conventional wisdom solidifying."

ONE DAY IN JANUARY 2015, just a week before Harris announced her campaign for Senate, Patrick Hennessey was in Pasadena, awaiting an oral argument in front of the Ninth Circuit. Hennessey, a San Diego attorney, had been working on this case

for nearly 20 years. His client, Johnny Baca, had already been tried twice for the 1995 murders of John Mix and John Adair. Baca had worked as the couple's housekeeper in their home near Palm Springs and was friends with Adair's son. Paul Vinegrad, the Riverside County prosecutor who tried the case both times, had argued that Baca had agreed to kill the men in exchange for a portion of the son's insurance proceeds.

Hennessey, an appellate lawyer, got the first conviction reversed because of mistakes Baca's trial attorney had

**But she tends to lead from behind."**

made. Hennessey was now arguing that Baca's second conviction should also be reversed based on how Vinegrad had handled the case.

The crux of the prosecution's case had rested on the testimony of a man named Daniel Melendez, who had bunked with Baca in a Riverside County jail while Baca awaited his first trial. Melendez claimed that Baca had confessed the murder-for-hire scheme to him. The problem, Hennessey argued, was that Melendez gave this testimony in exchange for a shorter sentence in his own case. While this kind of deal is cut all the time, Baca was entitled to know about it so his lawyer could cross-examine Melendez about his motive to testify.

But he was never told about the deal. In fact, when Baca's lawyer asked Melendez under oath if he was receiving anything for his testimony, Melendez said no. Vinegrad then called a colleague of his who was handling Melendez's case. This prosecutor falsely testified that he was not cutting Melendez any favors for testifying against Baca.

Hennessey argued before the California appellate court that this



was prosecutorial misconduct, but the court affirmed the conviction, reasoning that Baca would have been convicted even without the false testimony. So Hennessey had taken the case to federal court and finally found himself in front of the Ninth Circuit, the last stop before the Supreme Court. Sitting behind the heavy wooden bench were William Fletcher and Kim Wardlaw, both Clinton appointees, and Alex Kozinski, a Reagan appointee. (Kozinski has since resigned due to allegations of sexual misconduct.)

Hennessey argued first, answering a few mostly technical questions. Then it was his opponent's turn. The case was being argued by Kevin Vienna, a career deputy attorney general in Harris's office. Vienna began by admitting that the prosecutors had made some bad decisions. He was not ten seconds into his argument when the judges began peppering him with questions about whether the lying prosecutors had been disciplined (they hadn't).

Kozinski took the lead, and at one point he asked Vienna if Harris was aware of the situation. Vienna said she was not. An exasperated Kozinski told Vienna to speak to Harris about dropping the case. "Get ahold of the attorney general," Kozinski said, "get ahold of your supervisor and see whether they really want to stick by a conviction that was obtained by lying prosecutors." Kozinski told Vienna to play video of the argument for Harris to "make sure she understands the gravity of the situation" and that the case "speaks very poorly for the attorney general's office."

Hennessey, watching this pile-on, was "dumbfounded." He was approached by a couple of other attorneys in the courtroom who told him they'd never seen anything like it. The Ninth Circuit had recently started filming arguments, and this was one of the first to go online. It got passed around among lawyers and picked up on legal blogs, one of which called it "the appellate equivalent of torture porn."

Three weeks later, Vienna moved to effectively drop the case, allowing Baca a new trial. He claimed that

the matter "was discussed with the Attorney General" and that "[i]n the interest of justice, the People have concluded that the conviction should be set aside."

This decision, as with Harris's belated implementation of a Brady policy, came only after she had been publicly and humiliatingly backed into a corner by a trio of federal judges. And, as had been the case with the crime-lab scandal, it unfolded during the early stages of a high-profile campaign.

As Harris herself has written in her recent memoir, the discretion not to pursue a case is one of a prosecutor's more potent tools: "Prosecutors are among the most powerful actors in our system of justice. ... They have the power to put criminals behind bars, but they also have the discretion to dismiss cases where police used excessive force, or conducted a search and seizure without probable cause." Harris, in her role as attorney general, had the power to decide not to defend a conviction obtained by a lying prosecutor. While she eventually found her way to this decision in Johnny Baca's case, there are many others where her attorneys went to the mat for prosecutors who had

### **This is the defining criticism of Harris's prosecutorial years:**

withheld evidence, falsified confessions, and operated secret jailhouse snitch programs.

"The attorney general can do a lot to set a tone and set standards and tell DAs what's expected," Kozinski told me. "You set a very bad example by defending things that are indefensible."

**IN FEBRUARY**, Harris went on *The Breakfast Club*, a morning radio

show that has recently become a required stop for Democratic candidates. Sitting in the studio in her standard dark suit and black pearl earrings, a Starbucks cup in front of her, Harris seemed comfortable. The show is hosted by Charlamagne tha God, DJ Envy, and Angela Yee; 60 percent of its audience is black. Harris heckled DJ Envy on his HBCU loyalty — she went to Howard, he went to Hampton — and mentioned her love for Tupac and Cardi B.

When the conversation turned to criticism of Harris's choice to become a prosecutor, she delivered a mini-speech she's been giving again and again. "I'm not going to ever apologize for saying that when a child is molested, or a woman is raped, or one human being kills another human being, that there should be serious consequences," she said. "I'm never going to apologize for that. I also believe, strongly, that the criminal-justice system in America is deeply flawed, and it must be reformed, and that's why I have dedicated myself to doing the work of, one, focusing on vulnerable populations and making sure they are safe, and, equally, focusing on what we need to do to reform the criminal-justice system."

But she did admit some regrets. "Did I get enough done? No. Did I want to do more? Absolutely." Harris later pivoted to her Senate record on criminal justice, specifically a bail-reform bill she introduced in 2017. "I am proposing that we reform America's bail system and get rid of money bail," Harris said. "Because I know that people are sitting in jail every day in America because they can't afford to pay the \$20,000 to get out while they're awaiting trial. Meanwhile, the same person, who committed the same crime, gets out if they've got the money."

Bail reform has recently become a popular cause in the criminal-justice world. But the federal government is relatively toothless when it comes to bail, which is controlled at state and local levels. Harris's bill, which she proposed with Republican Senator Rand Paul, would incentivize states to reform their cash-bail systems.

If Harris had wanted to do more on bail, however, she had the chance at the end of her tenure as attorney gen-

### **She had opportunities to reform an unjust system, and she didn't take them.**

eral — and almost took it. In 2016, Harris was defending San Francisco's cash-bail system in court. The lawsuit challenged the county's use of bail schedules, which peg certain crimes at certain amounts of money and which





prosecutors use to pressure defendants into pleading guilty. The case got national attention when the San Francisco city attorney refused to defend it, calling California's cash-bail system "not just unconstitutional" but "bad public policy." George Gascón, who had been working to reform bail in San Francisco after taking over from Harris as district attorney, called this position "the right direction both legally and morally."

Three weeks later, Harris — who had recently gotten herself dismissed from the case on technical grounds — told the court that she too wanted to intervene. "We will argue that it is unconstitutional for local authorities to impose bail in a way that does not consider a person's ability to pay, or alternative methods of ensuring their appearance

at trial," a spokesperson for Harris said in a statement. "[D]enying equal access to justice solely based on income is unconstitutional."

This would have been a groundbreaking move. But then, three days later and with little explanation, Harris backed out. The same spokesperson told the *Chronicle* that she had changed her mind and would not be intervening in the case.

Up until this point, Harris had not publicly shown concern about cash bail. When she was a young prosecutor in Oakland, she routinely asked judges to set bail for defendants according to Alameda County's bail schedule. While she was district attorney, she successfully solicited San Francisco courts to dramatically increase the cost of bail for gun offenses, positing that "people come to San Francisco to commit crimes because it's cheaper to do it" there than in other counties with higher amounts of bail.

"It's noteworthy that for her entire prosecutorial career, she was in a position to do something to stop the senseless destruction of people and their families through the use of cash bail," says Alec Karakatsanis, the founder of Civil Rights Corps and a leading voice in the

bail-reform movement. "But she didn't."

This is the defining criticism of Harris's prosecutorial years: She had opportunities to reform an unjust system, and she didn't take them. She has espoused the same values since the beginning of her career. But her actions — and her inaction — have led many to wonder whether she can be counted on to follow through. "People can say a lot of things when they're running for president," says Karakatsanis. "We should be watching very closely to see how she wields power if she ever gets it again over these issues." ¶

**NICOLE ALLAN** is a former senior editor at *The California Sunday Magazine* and has a J.D. from Stanford Law School.

**DAVID SAMUEL STERN** is an artist based in New York. He has been making "Woven Portraits" since 2011 and teaching photography since 2009.



**After Stephanie  
Montgomery  
says she was  
raped at the strip  
club where she  
worked,**

**she went to  
the manager  
and the police.  
Nothing  
happened.**

**That's  
when she  
decided  
to tell her  
story as**





**big  
as she  
could.**





# The Billboard





By Kathy Dobie  
Photographs by Isadora Kosofsky







When the painting is rolled out across the billboard, cheers and shouts erupt from the street below. “Ohhh, damn!” “Hell, yeah, man!” A woman bursts into tears.

The artwork, 48-by-14 feet and hung above Robertson Boulevard in Los Angeles, depicts a superhero-sized woman in a pink dress and combat boots beheading a man. In her left hand, she holds up his head, dripping green goop; her right boot is planted on his body, suggesting she tore off the head with her bare hands. The background shows a strip club with a neon sign that says: “Fresh Meat.” Rats cluster around a doorway marked VIP, and, in the distance, zombies shamble toward the club. The lights cast eerie halos. The sky is a violent churn of blue-green clouds. “I’m Stephanie,” the billboard reads. “I was raped by a guy like this in a place like that. I told the club and the police, but no one did anything. So I painted this billboard.”

The billboard sits at the entrance to the I-10, one of the city’s busiest freeways, so there’s a steady stream of traffic on this Monday morning in February. Cars slow, drivers craning over their steering wheels to look up. Truck drivers downshift, then turn to study the people clustered on the sidewalk. Some of the drivers honk their horns or give a thumbs-up. A few look stricken. The artist, Stephanie Montgomery, 28 years old, dark-haired, hazel-eyed, a drop of a woman at 5-foot-2, gazes up at her work. “Oh my f---ing Jesus Christ!” she says. Down at the end of the block is the strip club where she used to work and where she says she was raped last June.

That was eight months ago, but unless you knew who she was and all the things that happened in that time and all that didn’t, you could only guess at what led her here. Still, as soon as the billboard

unfurled, it felt foretold by every failed sexual-assault investigation and nonexistent prosecution, by each undertrained and overwhelmed detective and every risk-averse district attorney, an entire justice system that still doesn’t take rape seriously.

Stephanie continues to stare upward. Then she begins to laugh in a short staccato, “Ha, ha, ha, ha!” Each “ha” a sharp exhalation of breath — “Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!” — until it sounds less like a laugh than some ancient chant of victory.

**STEPHANIE WAS** 3 years old when her father, a soldier stationed at Fort Hood in Central Texas, died in a Humvee accident. She has watercolor memories of him: blond hair, blue eyes, “tickling me till I couldn’t breathe and, like, doing this monster thing with his arms.”



Her mother told her, and she felt it in her bones: He had loved her very much. They had two birds at the time of her father's death, and the boy bird died. The girl bird would cry, and Stephanie would lie next to the bird and cry, and her mom would weep watching them.

Her teenage half-brother and his girlfriend helped raise her in Copperas Cove, a small town outside Fort Hood, while her mother worked full time at Walmart. Mom was born in Panama, and Stephanie inherited both her raven-colored hair and her vitality. Mom was a live wire: lots of fireworks, lots of opinions. She loved to gossip, to intrigue, argue, flirt but was deeply and forever wedded to Stephanie's father, and she never married again. As Stephanie grew up, mother and daughter would clash and clash hard. *Why you want to be an artist, mima? Why you use those colors? That's not right.* Drawing close to her, lips against her ear, *Mima, it's ugly.*

At 12, Stephanie was a full-on goth kid obsessed with death, with murder, with suicide, and the ever after. Maggots, blue skies, an eternity of bones. She was in class, writing in her journal, when a teacher snatched it from her hands. It was four years after Columbine, and the school principal screamed, "You want to kill people?" The counselor asked if she wanted to kill herself. Her family was given a choice between juvie and the children's psych ward. She got her hospital socks, hospital robe, and hospital washcloth. Went to group therapy with a scary girl who chased a neighbor down the street with a knife. Was told that she was acting out because of her father's death. She agreed to everything. They put her on antipsychotics and antidepressants and after a week allowed her to go home.

Her world was now a dirty gray. Her short-term memory shot to hell, so schoolwork was difficult. Her mom, that canny and unapologetic fighter in or out of her corner, did some reading and slowly weaned Stephanie off the medication. Whenever the social worker came to check on her, Mom said, *Yes, ma'am, she's taking her meds still.* Stephanie decided to act happy, happy all the time and super enthusiastic about, well, everything, so she would never be taken away and locked up again. She took all of her journals to school, tore the pages to bits, and threw them away. A fitting place for a burial.

She kept drawing, kept painting. She attended the Art Institute of Dallas until her boyfriend joined the Army. "I couldn't handle it," she says. She went into flight mode. Took off to San Antonio and began attending the Art Institute there. Then, when her best friend, Christine Boomhower, said, "I'm leaving for L.A. Do you want to come along?" Stephanie said, "Hell, yes." She was 22.



FROM TOP  
Stephanie  
with her mom;  
at 11; and at 17

In order to save money for the move, Stephanie began to dance at a high-end Dallas strip club. Stephanie often described herself as a person without shame. "My embarrassment meter is, like, nonexistent." She'd gone to strip clubs before, and the dancers had mesmerized her. They were sexy and fluid and strong, like airborne mermaids. She felt free when she was naked; she loved nude figurative-art modeling, which she began doing at art school. It felt so right that she figured she'd retire to a nudist colony when she was old. For her, dancing was like revealing her deepest, unadorned self in a secret place to secret people whom she would never see outside the club. It felt ... beautiful. Like some hot and holy gift to the universe.

When she and Christine arrived in Los Angeles in January 2013, they rented a studio apartment north of Koreatown. Christine landed an unpaid internship with an independent designer, and Stephanie supported them both by dancing at Skin, "a gentlemen's lounge," on Robertson Boulevard. She chose Skin after



**Stephanie found herself at Planned Parenthood, sitting in the exam room. Facing the nurse who faced her computer screen. How many partners have you had? "Voluntarily? One."**

looking up strip-club reviews on Yelp. The photos made it look classy. She didn't want to dance for drunken party boys yelling, "Show us your titties!" She wanted to perform.

She always had her sketchbook with her, and during downtime at the club, she would draw the girls, the customers — sharp and whimsical renderings where the men sometimes appeared as wild hogs and the girls grew penises out of their foreheads like unicorns. She had fun dancing at first, but bit by bit the joy and the ease got all tangled up in some sticky web of men's entitlement and contempt.

When she began at Skin, she had that super-adorable, perfectly indulgent, girl-next-door persona. She wore her hair long and natural, sported cute little glasses, was all Texas sugar and sexiness, especially with the older men. Lonely old dudes who want to feel special were her favorite customers. But over time, the girl next door was ground down, eroded by a steady drip, drip, drip of asshole. One time, she was in a VIP room with a customer who dropped his pants and told her to get busy. She refused. He demanded. She did her liquid-honey routine: "Let's just enjoy our time together. I can take my clothes off for you. Ooh, isn't that fun?" He wouldn't stop. She threatened to walk out with his money if he kept it up. *Suck my dick! Suck my dick!* he wailed, so she got up and left. Within minutes, a manager, who has since left the club, called her in, telling her a customer had complained that she was trying to gouge him for more money. Stephanie says she explained what had happened, but the manager insisted she return the client's fee. She refused and was fired.

When she went back to Skin a few weeks later — "Being stripper fired is not like being regular fired" — she had shaved the back of her head and begun dying her hair yellow, blue, pink, green, whatever suited her at the moment. She stopped coddling and wheedling, being adorable while peeling their hands off of her. She would give those hands a swift schoolteacher's smack. She felt as though she could breathe again. Eventually, her clientele shifted to those guys who liked a little managing.

One night in her studio apartment after the end of her shift, Stephanie lived alone now. Christine had moved

out. The apartment was a dirty mess. Just walking into it exhausted her. Stephanie had been dancing for one and a half years, and she was losing heart. Nothing was happening with her art. She'd partnered up with some street artists, participated in some group shows at galleries, gotten a few commissions, mostly from friends and acquaintances, but they'd only led to more of the same. She was dog paddling in a rain-filled rut.

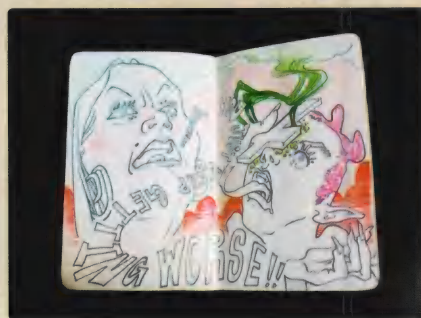
She was scared that night. She felt something cracking inside. She began to cry and couldn't stop. She wasn't going to make it. The darkness of that thought nearly swallowed her. *Please, I need help*, she begged. The sun was just coming up, no lie, and it sent a bright streak across the floor. Her shoulders dropped; something washed over her. A sense of peace, a calm, that said, *It's going to be OK. Stephanie, you're going to be all right.*

For months afterward, she followed that light. Took it wherever it led her. To the beach at Santa Monica, breathing in the soft and salty air. To a chakra healer who let her pour out her soul while taking all of her hard-earned cash, the beaucoup money she was making at Skin, but so what? For the first time, someone was listening. To a bookstore downtown, where she went straight upstairs as though she were being pulled by a rope, directly to a shelf where one book gleamed. She took it down. A kids book, *What Is Death?* She sat on the floor, read it, and sobbed. She began to write in a journal again. After deciding she would date only in a serious way, she managed to pick one bore after the other. Meanwhile, she was constantly texting with Dakota Cann, this cute boy she had met at the Art Institute of Dallas. She'd always had a crush on him, but now they were becoming friends. Both Bore Number One and Bore Number Two demanded she cut this guy out of her life.

She quit Skin and took a job running a salad bar at a restaurant and then began to work at a frame shop. She was hardly making any money, so she moved back in with Christine, taking a couch in her living room. Stephanie was painting goddesses, earth mothers and queens, strippers and dominatrixes — energetic, sexy, fantastical work. She wanted her art to be fun, and she wanted it to empower women. That summer of 2017, she traveled through the Southwest to various music festivals as an artist's assistant, doing pop-up shops and murals. The trip was an eye-opener. She realized a way forward. She could do this with her own work. But she needed money, not salad-bar money

BELOW  
Samples  
from Stephanie's  
notebooks

OPPOSITE  
Near Venice  
Beach







or frame-shop money, for a truck and display panels, for canvases and entrance fees, so she decided to go back to Skin. This time with a goal and an exit plan.

**FIVE YEARS HAD PASSED** since she'd arrived in L.A. She was 27. More self-aware, confident of herself as an artist, her demons tempered, if not exactly house-trained. She returned to Skin in March 2018. She tried hard to hold on to the sense that this was just a means to an end and she was just passing through. April ... May ... But Skin was a poisonous place. An illusion. The red velvet. The chandeliers. The ridiculous throwback version of luxury. The gilt-framed mirrors and the paintings of naked blond women. When Stephanie looked into those mirrors, she could've sworn she saw a butcher shop reflected back.

"Skin. For men who have taste. For men who have style. For men who want it all." In L.A.'s crowded strip-club scene, Skin flies under the radar, hardly as well-known as Jumbo's Clown Room or Spearmint Rhino, for instance. It's been described as a discreet clubhouse for TV and film executives and the occasional B-list celeb. The club is often empty, but that's made up for by the heavy spenders who walk through the door.

Tables and banquettes face the small stage. Lap dances are performed in an adjoining room, but the VIP rooms, some with couches, some with beds, are the money-makers. The prices are among the highest of any club in L.A. Forty dollars for a one-song lap dance, \$300 for five songs in a regular VIP room, \$600 for 15 songs in a room with a couch, and \$900 for a room with a bed. The dancers give half their take to the club. They're also expected to tip every nondancer working that shift — the bartender, the DJ, the bouncer, the manager. Tipping them well means getting high rollers pushed your way and being treated decently by management.

In the parking lot behind the club, there's a super-VIP room, a kind of VVIP room, available to the big ballers and special friends of the owners. It looks like a concrete bunker, whitewashed cement and windowless, like some place you might store tools or auto parts. But inside there are curved couches, a private dancing booth, and a bathroom. Stephanie used to describe it as the place where you "sexily avoid being raped."

Shifts can be tedious. Hours go by with no one in the club. The girls lie on the floor or sit against the wall, working their cellphones. They take naps in the VIP rooms. When someone rolls up to the entrance, the doorman notifies the DJ — cameras linked to the manager's





office catch every arrival — and, presto, the girls shed their robes or hoodies, bobble into their heels, the DJ starts up the music, the bartender takes up her station, and when the customer walks in, the DJ is mid-croon, “Sexy, hot, hot, hot Cayenne on stage!” and a girl is working the pole to Doja Cat’s “Go to Town.”

It’s a fully nude club, so serving alcohol is illegal. The bar offers astronomically priced Red Bulls and water, but according to four dancers who have worked there, anything goes in the VIP rooms. Alcohol’s offered there. Coke. And some of the dancers will have sex, which they say management is aware of. The club is owned by Stanley Yang and David Chew, co-owners of another fully nude club in L.A., Silver Reign.

It’s a hangout for their rich friends, one dancer says. “It’s very slow, and it makes it so you can’t, like, do honest work. You can’t just go and dance and entertain men. They cater to the needs of these, like, sick men, sick, sick men.” Probably half the dancers played it on the up and up, Stephanie says. They were hired as dancers, and that’s what they offered.

(Reached by phone, David Chew denied that alcohol, drugs, or sex were offered or sold at Skin. “It’s against the law,” he said. “Strip

clubs are regulated by the police department. They have vice-squad units that monitor the clubs, and my clubs are constantly under police supervision. If those activities were going on, I would no longer be owning and operating clubs. LAPD would have put me out of business.” When asked if it was possible that drugs and alcohol were offered or sold by the dancers in the VIP rooms without his knowing, he said it was. “If a dancer chooses to sell drugs in the VIP room, it’s out of view, and I wouldn’t necessarily know.”)

**JUNE 10, 2018**, after midnight. Stephanie was sitting outside, smoking a menthol she’d bummed from one of the other girls. It was a humid, mild, starless night. A baby breeze touched her hair, no more than a kiss. Jason Borba walked up and asked if she wanted to go to the back VIP room. In the messed-up family that was Skin, Jason seemed to be a favorite son. He used to work there as a bouncer. He was a mixed-martial-arts fighter and trainer, ripped, good-looking, young — the management loved him. Two weeks earlier, Stephanie had gone to the VVIP room with him and another girl, and it was just normal sexy stuff, so she didn’t think twice about going back there with him again.



**It almost seemed like she was at fault for giving the authorities so little to go on. Only her word, and that word was the word of a stripper.**

of these overly aggressive customers, and I just need to make my money and get out of here. But then Jason grabbed her and threw her down onto the couch.

"Borba placed his hand on the victim's throat," the police report reads. "He did not strangle the victim however he used his hand as a way to prevent her from standing up." Stephanie scrambled against her own panic. *OK, that's fine. I see what you're trying to do. You're trying to do some domination-fantasy play. OK, that's fine. He's not choking me. He's not hurting me, so it's cool, it's cool.*

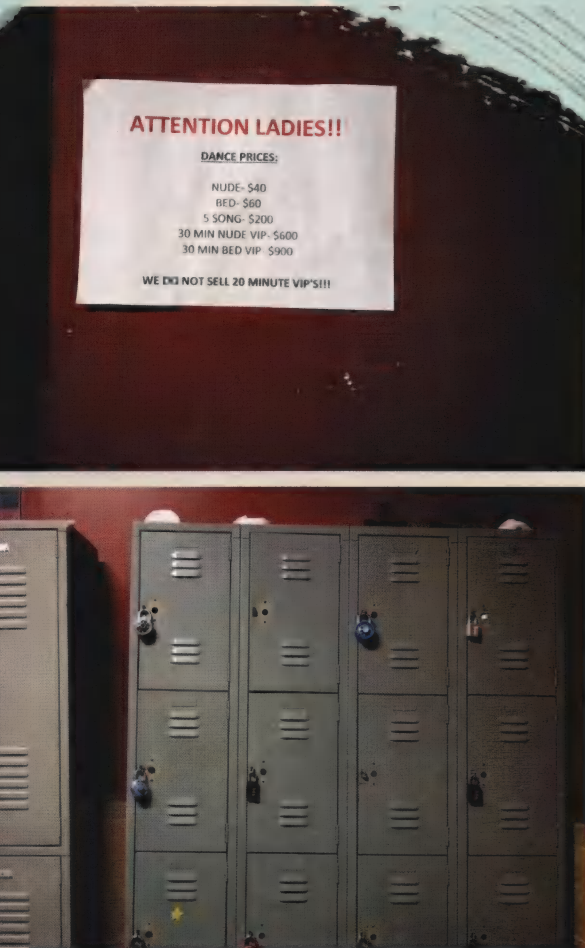
"This is not going to happen," she told him, trying to push him off her. She tried to choke him back, and as they struggled, the condom slipped off. "Borba kept his hand on the victim's throat and with his other hand placed his fingers inside the victim's vagina," the report continues. "Borba pulled his fingers out of the victim's vagina and forced his penis into the victim's vagina." Stephanie's brain shut off. *Too late. It was over.* "I was like, that's it for me. I have no control over this situation. And it's already done, so I just kind of lay there and let it happen."

"Borba thrust into the victim several times on the couch, then picked the victim up and pushed her up against a wall," the report goes on. "Borba then forced his penis into the victim's vagina while he held her up against the wall. Borba then push [sic] the victim down to the floor. The victim was on her hands and knees and Borba forced his penis into her vagina from behind. Then Borba picked her up and placed her on the couch again. Borba forced his penis into her vagina several [sic] more times, Borba then pulled out and ejaculated on the floor."

After Jason went into the bathroom to clean up, he asked her how much money she wanted for the room. She said a thousand. It was for her time in the room. The usual fee. Jason was incredulous, Stephanie says. He always got discounts, and he wanted one now.

Her chest went tight. She couldn't even tell if it was panic or anger gripping her, but she was like an animal clawing for balance, for some way to right herself. "Well, what's in your pockets? Empty your bank account. Give me something for this s---!" He Venmoed her \$350. "Then I just left, like, I just walked out of there. Actually, I walked out of there, and I had a cigarette with him. Isn't that f---ed up? We walked out, and he lit up a cigarette, and I'm like, 'Give me a cigarette.'"

→



CLOCKWISE  
FROM LEFT  
The main room  
at Skin; a list  
of prices in  
the women's  
bathroom; the  
dancers' lockers

But this time, as soon as they got inside and Stephanie began fiddling with the lights, getting the mood right, she says Jason pulled off his pants. "Whoa!" she told him. "That's not how this works! I'm the one who takes my clothes off." She'd always slipped into this humorous, soothing tone when things began to go a little haywire. But she might as well have been voiceless because — as she would later report to the police — he just stripped off his shirt and then grabbed his pants from the couch, fishing a condom out of one of his pockets.

"I don't know what you think you're gonna do with that, but we're not gonna do that, OK?" Stephanie said, keeping her voice light. She was wearing all white, white bra, white garter belt, white stockings, and white panties, and he began yanking off her clothes. Then he was trying to finger her. "You need to chill out! Just relax!" She pushed him away, but he was right back on her. A fast-cutting commentary began running through her head. *Ohhh, OK. He's just gonna be one*



**How would she know what to expect, how to manage the aftermath of rape? There's no prep for girls, no resiliency training for trauma, the way there is for soldiers.**

After she smoked, she went inside into the dressing room and sat there. *It happened*, she thought. Then she thought nothing for a full minute. So blank and still she seemed frozen. Her mother was arriving from Texas the next day to spend a week with her. Dakota, now her boyfriend, was flying up after that. She had to pull herself together. She could handle this. She was young, she didn't know how to make her life work just yet, but she knew she could take a hit. The thing that had just happened to her? Didn't happen. She would chalk it up as a loss. She would bury it alive. She took a deep breath, steeled herself, and walked out into the club, but inside she was on the run, running like mad, away.

(A call to Jason Borba was returned by his lawyer, Glen Jonas, who provided this statement: "Miss Montgomery is an exploitive attention-seeker making false allegations against my client so she can elevate her failing art career." He declined to answer any questions. Co-owner David Chew said he was not aware of Stephanie's allegation until the billboard went up in February. "Once we found out," he said, "we did an internal investigation and determined that the assault did not happen.")

All that week, as she showed her mother around, Stephanie wore her happy face. It's not like she couldn't tell her mother; there were no taboo topics with Mom, but Stephanie couldn't go near the images, never mind let the words come stumbling out into what would be a torrent of her mom's emotions. It Did Not Happen.

When Dakota arrived, she was still sailing along in full-speed denial, but at the end of the weekend, when the two of them began showing symptoms of an STD, she was yanked up short. Now she had to tell him about what happened that night. Dakota was what she called "baby-sized" when it comes to romantic, sexual relationships. He hadn't been in a ton of them. He's a nerd — she loves nerds — a gamer, an artist, a sweet, good, hilarious guy whom she considers her best friend. When she began to talk, it almost sounded like she was confessing an affair. She felt horribly guilty "for not addressing the situation immediately and thinking I could just cut it off and that it would only affect me. I felt dirty and wrong and like he didn't deserve a gross-out bitch like me." Dakota was furious at Jason. "He's disgusting! What a pig!" he said.

The next day, they went to Planned Parenthood, and Stephanie found herself



CLOCKWISE  
FROM TOP LEFT  
Stephanie with  
Ari Sturm; a  
friend hugging  
Stephanie after  
the completion  
of the painting;  
with Dakota  
Cann; Day Riddle  
holding Stephanie  
as the billboard  
goes up

sitting in the exam room, facing the nurse who faced her computer screen. *Just a couple of questions.* Out in the hallway, steps, a laugh, a door shutting. *Name? Date of birth?* Tap, tap, tap, tap. *How many partners have you had?* "Voluntarily? One." The nurse looked at her. Sharp, wary.

*Involuntarily?* "Well, that's what the issue is," Stephanie said. *Have you reported it to the police? No. Do you want to?* No. She just wanted to be tested for STDs, reassure herself, reassure her boyfriend, then shove it all away from her. Again. She knew that if she let this thing in, it would come at her like a wrecking ball. The nurse looked slightly horrified, but she didn't say anything more and just continued with the paperwork.

But when it came time for the exam, the doctor brought it up. She sat Stephanie down and, holding her gaze, spoke about her own rape. She was straightforward and kind. *Look, you seem to be handling it just fine, but if you're not going to report it to the police, you need to talk to your management so that this person doesn't do it to anybody else. It's great that you can walk away from this, but imagine the next girl. This could be the thing that breaks her.*





**STEPHANIE TRIED** to keep working at Skin. She was so numb, she didn't even know what parts of her had been amputated. Once, she saw Jason enter the club, wave at her, and then disappear. She and Dakota hadn't contracted an STD, so she was doing everything she could to forget. On her fifth night back, one of the newer girls, a dancer called Zaria\*, started chatting with her.

Zaria had liked Stephanie from the first time she saw her with her punk hair and her sketchbook. Stephanie had an air of confidence, of having a life outside the club and inside her head. She managed to keep away from the cutthroat cliques and the gossip, while still being nice to everyone — and she could really dance. Zaria was intrigued. "I love your hair," she told Stephanie the first day she saw her. But on this night, Zaria noticed that Stephanie was

deflated; her eyes looked sad. So she took a minute to ask how everything was going. "I haven't come in a lot because something awful went down here," Stephanie told her.

Without missing a beat, Zaria asked her, "Was it Jason?" Stephanie was flooded. *What? How did you...?* Stephanie needed to hear the whole story, so she and Zaria went outside to talk.

Shortly after being hired, Zaria was asked by another dancer to go with

her into the VIP room — a customer wanted two girls. It was 4 a.m., the club was closing, but this guy was friends with the management, Zaria was told, a regular at the club. They'd stay open late for him. Of course, the manager, the bouncer, the DJ all expected big tips because, the logic went, they were all staying late so the two girls could make money.

When Jason took off his pants, she was so new, Zaria remembers, that she almost cried out, "That's illegal!" Jason began grabbing at her butt and trying to put his finger inside her vagina, she told Stephanie, and Zaria found herself trying to wriggle away from him, making nonoffensive attempts to get his hands off her. *Whoops! Whoopsie!* Twist, turn. Then he started trying to push himself inside her.

"I felt completely trapped," she said. Jason was strong and relentless. Everyone seemed to love him, her job depended on making a guy like this feel good, and he was getting increasingly unhappy with her. She just kept twisting and dodging while smiling and cooing. *OK, OK, I don't need you here*, she remembers Jason saying. *You can just leave.*

Dismissed, she walked out of the room, a look of shock and humiliation slapped on her face. The manager, the bouncer, the other dancers glanced at her and then looked away. "I knew that they knew what they put me into," Zaria said, "and I felt so betrayed." After that night, Zaria stayed home for a couple weeks; the other dancer wasn't seen at the club for months. (When asked about the incident, Jason Borba's lawyer declined to respond.)

For Stephanie, Zaria's story was an unlocking. Every emotion wrapped up tight surged forward. Soon some other girl, new to the club, perhaps, an 18- or 19-year-old, would be thrown into a room with Jason. She decided, OK, yes, she would talk to the management.

Of the two managers, BeckySue Sheely was the sweetest and chummiest, the craziest and cruelest. She could turn on a dime. She was the

\* Name has been changed



Queen Bee at Skin, and Zaria cautioned Stephanie about talking to her. "She and Jason are friends, just remember that. She'll be on his side."

So Stephanie decided to talk to Raoul Villareal, who was more of a daddy figure at the club. He was in his early 40s and liked to bring in food for his favorites. He also liked to stir the pot, repeating something mean one girl had said about another, and then turning around and settling everyone down.

When Stephanie asked Raoul if she could talk to him for a minute, he agreed, but when she wanted to close the door to the office, he looked nervous. After telling him that Jason had raped her, it was some comfort to see the dismay on his face. He thought they should tell Becky. Stephanie wanted to think about that first. Ever since the rape, she'd been trying to get her hands back on the reins, slow things down, choose the pace.

Even though Raoul promised not to tell Becky, not yet at least, Stephanie got a text from her the next day, asking her to come in and talk. She showed up at the club in nonwork clothes, just a tank top, jeans, flip-flops, no makeup. They sat at the little table outside, where Jason had approached her that night.

Becky asked her what she wanted done. She didn't ask what had happened, Stephanie says. She'd already heard. *So what next? You want him to get into trouble? You want to take him to court, make him pay, what?* Becky had a strong jaw, a blunt manner, big boobs, all of which made her seem aggressive that evening, like, *Hey, I can do the sugar and the honey, the best-girlfriend routine, but right now I'm done. What's the problem?*

"I really don't know what I want," Stephanie told her. "I just don't want it to happen to anybody else. Like, something needs to be done."

Stephanie realized she hadn't thought it out. She had gotten as far as I'll tell my bosses what went down, and then they'll take over. Now Becky was reasoning with her. *As awful as it is, in this line of work, it happens. And Jason, well, you know Jason. He likes to party with the girls, and some actually want to have sex with him. He's a good-looking guy.*

Then Becky, using her intimate, caring voice, offered money. *Not that money would make it all go away, but it could make things better. Think about the amount of money that would make this as good as it can be.*

(Reached by phone, BeckySue Sheely said, "I do not want to talk about this." Raoul Villareal did not respond to queries.)

Suddenly, Stephanie felt exhausted. "I don't know. I wasn't even thinking about that," she told Becky. "Maybe we can talk about this later." She wanted to be home, curled under the covers of her bed.

**She felt bad for reporting late, too, not knowing how common it is for women to put off reporting because they don't trust the police or they're scared or in shock.**

The next morning, Stephanie woke in a fury. *She was offering me hush money!* "That's when I was like, I need to f--- this place up. Like, I need to spray them top to bottom." She talked with some friends who have a graffiti crew, and they were like, "Yeah, let's do this mother!" Then a guy she knew vaguely from the street-art scene, Ari Sturm, called out of the blue. They chatted about nothing until Stephanie asked him what would be the legal repercussions of spray painting a building. Ari told her to just be polite to anyone who complains and paint it over.

After they hung up, Stephanie called back. "Actually, I don't think you understood what I meant. I mean, if I bomb the f--- out of this place. I destroy it. Like, I don't care about their goddamn doors, or their plants, or their goddamn windows, or their cars. And I just f---ing blow it up." She paused and then asked, "What are the legal repercussions of that?"

When Ari, taken aback, asked what was going on, Stephanie told him something really bad had happened at the club. When she first began telling friends, that's how she put it, in general terms, the pitch and quake of her voice indicating so much more.

Stephanie and Ari had met earlier in the year at the Fame Yard, a parking lot on Melrose known for its ever-changing parade of street art. Stephanie was working on a mural there. Ari, who's in his 40s, had knocked around the entertainment industry as a TV and film producer, writer, photographer, contestant on *Fear Factor*. He once described himself as "your dead-hooker friend," the guy you call if you should wake up and find one in your bed.

Recently, he had went from photographing street artists and their work to being one himself. As TrustyScribe, he paints word bubbles on walls and buildings, saying things like "Love Is the Only Language I Speak Fluently" and "Music Is the Sound My Soul Makes When It Dreams." Ari advised her to go to the police and file a report.

When Stephanie went to the police, she took a friend along, a woman who had been raped in her teens. They hit three police stations before they landed at the right one, and each time, Stephanie had to say, "I'm here to report a rape," only to be directed to another location. The absurdity of it almost made her want to laugh. How hard did it have to be? Finally, she had the correct station. As soon

For Stephanie, what happened became a litmus test of who her friends were.





as the words came out of her mouth, the male officer quickly left and returned with a female cop.

They stood at the end of the counter, the pony-tailed cop across from her. Straight off, the officer told Stephanie she was so sorry this had happened to her. The brisk, practical manner Stephanie had adopted for reporting gave way. She felt a hunger well up. *This is the only time you will have to tell this story*, the officer reassured her. *We'll take over from here*. As Stephanie talked, the lobby and everyone in it faded. There was just this police person telling her none of it was

her fault, she was doing the right thing, and they would do everything possible to get this guy. "I was like, *Oh my god, maybe I can trust the authorities*. Like, maybe this is actually a thing, you know?" The officer told her they would put her in contact with a detective.

On the way home, the Uber driver was chatty. He was having an awesome day so far. *So, how's your day going?*

When Stephanie told him they had just left the police department, he perked up even more. Could she tell him why? *I mean, if she didn't mind*, he was curious.

"Filing a rape report," Stephanie said flatly.

Silence.

*Yeah, I was raped, she was raped, probably a lot of women you know were raped*, she wanted to tell him. *It's a thing, an actual thing, Mr. Sunny-side Up. Chairs, chalk, earthquakes, actual things. They exist. Guitars, cactuses, Big Macs, rape. Real, real, real, as real as who you're seeing in your rearview mirror. Hi, I'm Stephanie. I was raped.*

**THE SUMMER LEFT**, fall came in, and, back at the frame shop, her co-worker Day Riggle wondered where the hell the old Stephanie had gone. Day had always thought of Stephanie as her "bright light," a reliably cheerful shot of sunshine, but now it seemed Stephanie was always disappearing, and Day would find her in the parking lot, wild-eyed and sobbing. She'd become quick-tempered, too. Anything could set her off, a mistake on a piece of mat she was cutting, and her face would go deep red and she'd start cursing. She'd even begun to think some of the customers were looking down on her, but Stephanie wouldn't tell Day what was going on.

Whammed by anger or sadness, flashing back on her whole life and seeing it fatalistically, the rape set like a trap at the end of it. *If my father hadn't died.... If I hadn't then been left alone with my mother.... If we hadn't been so poor....* She was haunted by the feeling that she was going to die soon. She didn't know if these waves of emotion were normal or crazy. How would she know what to expect, how to manage the aftermath of rape? There's no prep for girls, no resiliency training for trauma, the way there is for soldiers. So she talked to friends and found

that being raped is like a litmus test. Friends who supported her, who got it, like Day, who hugged her when she finally found out and told her, *No, no, no, you have nothing to be ashamed of*, and friends who shocked the hell out of her.

One guy asked her to define what she meant by rape because, you know, that's so political now with the #MeToo movement. Every guy's a rapist, so, like, how do you define rape? *You could research this by yourself and have this conversation with someone else, but you want to have it with me?* Stephanie thought. *Let's have it. Let's have*



this f---ing conversation. As gently as I possibly can. Because I love you, and I'm gonna use this as a form of education for you because I'm being goddamn patient. And graceful. Still, she began to use air quotes when she mentioned some of her "friends."

No word from the detective assigned to the case, Russel Hess. The first and only time they met, a few days after Stephanie filed the police report in August, he seemed standoffish to her. That earlier feeling she'd had of doing the right thing, of how her reporting might help another woman even if it didn't help her, dissolved.

She called him once that fall, and he said they were tracking Jason's movements. So when the time came ... *they could, like, I don't know, pounce?* Stephanie wondered. Ari referred her to a lawyer, who told her rapes are common and hard cases to win — he knows because he's represented both sides. The lawyer recommended she call an attorney who worked at the law offices of Gloria Allred, the famed women's rights advocate. When she called, the attorney told her it was a difficult case, a he said/she said case. "She's like, 'If you want to contact a job-injury lawyer, they might take interest in it,' and I'm like, 'Cool. So, like, those corny guys you see on commercials that are like, 'Have you been bitten by a dog? Call us! Call Chank the Hank!'" OK, so, like, you want me to call this dude? Got it."

She'd been told so many times that her rape was a "he said/she said" case, his word against hers, that she believed it. So it almost seemed like she was at fault for giving the authorities so little to go on. Only her word, and that word — no one would say this out loud, but she knew it's what they felt — was the word of a stripper.

She felt bad for reporting late, too, not knowing how common it is for women to put off reporting because they don't trust the police or they're scared or in shock or ashamed. She didn't know that trained investigators can work around the delayed reporting, or that for them, he said/she said is a lazy, out-of-date way of thinking. But she began to pick up information here and there, enough to wonder why Hess had never asked her whom she'd talked to about the rape in the aftermath, people who could help establish her truthfulness, or checked the CCTV footage at the club, or talked to the people who were in Skin that night and might've seen her and Jason go back to the VVIP room. No offer of a call, during which the police would listen in while she tried to get Jason to admit to the attack. Just silence, a lengthening silence where her questions whirled.

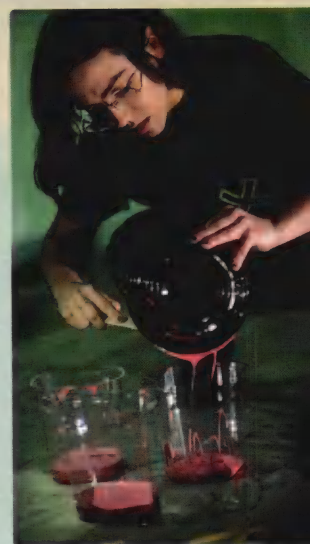


Stephanie worked on the billboard for six days.

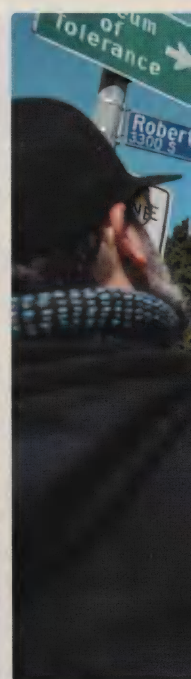
Stephanie came to realize she'd reached the dead end of a road she had never wanted to be on in the first place. Nothing was going to happen. No justice, just another rape, the world moved on. The #MeToo movement had opened up the conversation, sure, and it had also spurred men into hyperdefensiveness and aggression, but when the smoke cleared, had anything really changed? Where were the arrests, the convictions? Did a stripper have a bigger voice, a better shot at justice than she would've two or five or twenty years ago?

As the months passed, something boiled and wept inside her; she couldn't live with the silence, couldn't let the rape go unanswered or pretend it never happened, as she had first hoped to do. An idea began to take hold. She was going to paint something, something huge, something public, and call out the rapist, the strip club, the LAPD.

She needed someone to help her, somebody who knew how to make things happen, and Ari Sturm was ready and waiting. They began to rough things out. The text came together first, and Stephanie made some preliminary sketches. Ari took \$5,000 of his own money to rent







the billboard for a month, starting on February 11, 2019. He found a warehouse where the vinyl canvas could be hung and painted. Meanwhile, Stephanie had decided to leave L.A. She'd been thinking about returning to Texas for a while. Dakota had been urging her to move in with him, but she put it off because she didn't want the start of their life together to be tangled up in the rape. She wasn't going to be driven from L.A.; she was going to choose Dakota. By January, it felt right.

Three days before leaving town, Stephanie decided to call Detective Hess again and see how the case was going. It'd been over five months since she'd filed a report. *Well, it's been a little slow because of the holiday season, he told her. I've also been making a lot of arrests, and that's meant a lot of paperwork.* He had verified where Jason lived, and he had talked to his neighbors and roommates. He'd also reached out to the management of Skin, but they didn't want to speak to him. He was going to go in person and see if that changed their disposition.

When Stephanie got off the phone, she sat quietly for a while. She tried to figure out if the case was moving along or not. "I don't know how this works. I don't know how, like, anything legal works." He was super busy because of the holidays? Because of making lots and lots of arrests? Obviously her case, filed last summer, was at the bottom of some ginormous pile of Thanksgiving turkeys and

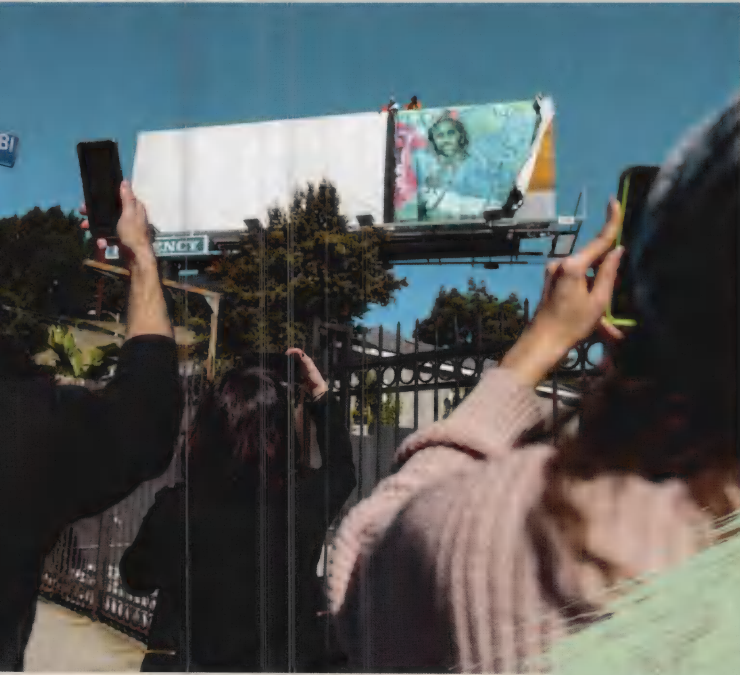
Christmas presents and dozens of other rapes with better victims than her. "Literally, nobody gives a s---." She sat on Ari's couch in paint-covered black jeans, her cell still clutched in her hand. Tears started running down her face. She wasn't sobbing, though. She was whispering, a shaky, fierce whisper. "I'm just so angry. I'm so angry. I'm so angry. I'm so angry." She took a deep breath; a sob escaped. "Excuse me." Pause. Whisper. "I'm so angry."

**INSIDE THE WAREHOUSE,** it was chilly and damp. Klieg lights shone on the huge canvas, which hung from the ceiling to the cement floor, so tall that Stephanie had to use a scissor lift to paint the top two-thirds. She and Ari worked 12- to 13-hour days, for six straight days. A lot of Ari's work was sous chef kind of work, getting Stephanie wet rags when she needed them, handing her pens or brushes, adjusting the lights, making a coffee run. He stenciled the letters on the first morning. He would fill them in on the last day.

While she was in Texas, figuring out the composition, Stephanie had toyed with the idea of making Jason a dog, and maybe she could have him on a leash. But that didn't sit right. Finally, she'd come up with making him a zombie, and she would be his slayer. To depict herself and Jason as realistically as possible, she worked from photographs. The female zombie rising from the corner of the painting was drawn from memory to look like Becky.



**As the months passed, something boiled and wept inside her; she couldn't let the rape go unanswered or pretend it never happened.**



should make Jason look more tired and gaunt."

When the painting was done, it was carefully lowered to the floor and spread out, ready to be rolled up and transported to the billboard site. Stephanie took off her black combat boots and began to dance on it. Arms out, legs stomping on Jason's face. "Ha, ha, ha, you thought you could break me." She stamped and whirled across the canvas. The baby-doll dress, the neck goop, the zombies trundling toward their promised land.

When the billboard was unveiled that sunny February morning, Stephanie asked that it be unrolled right to left, so first the club appeared, the rats, the severed head. Then the zombie slayer in her pink dress, head up, body thrust forward, almost stepping out of the painting, and, finally, the words: "I'm Stephanie. I was raped by a guy like this in a place like that..." She hoped a thousand women would look up and feel vindicated and every bastard that had done something similar would burn in shame and hurry on. *Revenge for me, justice for other women*, she thought.

In the next few days, before returning to Dallas, she would hang with a tight group of friends. She would cuddle with Dakota. She would post a photograph of the billboard on Instagram and receive close to 700 likes, while over at Reddit the response would be mixed with commenters doubting the police had done nothing or pointing out the risks she'd taken working as a stripper. An NBC news outlet would interview Stephanie, but the segment would never air.

The day before returning home, she would go see Detective Hess. She would show him a photo of the billboard on her cellphone, which he would look at silently for a long time. She would hand him a list of all the people she talked to about



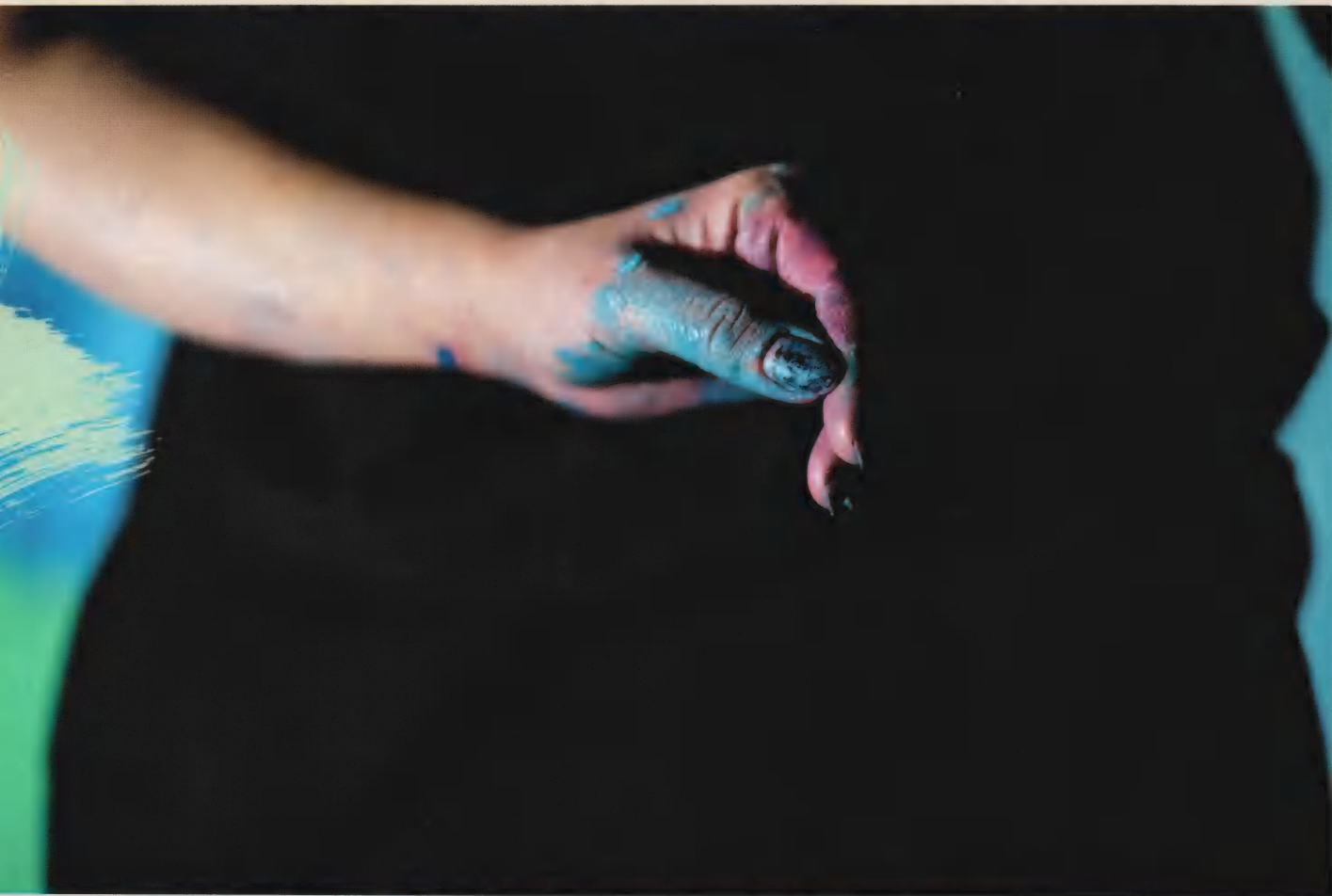
She put off painting Jason's face for as long as she could, finally downing a couple shots of booze, "like you do before you jump into a bar fight." But instead of plunging in, she tunneled into every loss and hurt and hard thing that had happened in her life. By the time Dakota came home from work, she was a sobbing mess. The next day, though, she got it done, stone-cold sober. At the warehouse, she had to paint him all over again, but this time 4-feet high.

Zaria came by almost every day. When she wasn't around, she would send Stephanie funny memes. The two were so close, so attuned, that they sometimes just made noises at each other, a conversation of squeaks, clicks, and grunts that only they seemed to understand. As Stephanie painted Jason, Zaria watched from below. "You

TOP  
The billboard is unfurled

BOTTOM  
Stephanie and Dakota embracing after its installation





the rape and push him to call them. She would say, "Just do your job!" He would tell her he got a statement from Jason before he lawyered up. He'd say no one wants to work sex crimes — he had 250 cases last year — but he volunteered for this job. He put it before his own family. He wouldn't have done anything different with this case. When she continued to berate him, he'd say she was being passive-aggressive. I hope I'm not being passive, she'd reply. (Citing confidentiality, Hess said he could not comment on the case.)

She would miss her plane home and break down at the airport. But she would eventually get there.

In Dallas, she took a job at a frame shop. She started an art project featuring Monty the Monster Slayer, where she began to take all the crazy, stupid things she had heard since the rape, turn them into monsters, and kill them. She began to work on a graphic novel about Skin.

Stephanie heard that Becky had told the employees at Skin not to talk to outsiders and that Stephanie was a liar. In April, the district attorney declined to press charges against Jason Borba. Stephanie was visiting L.A. when

Detective Hess called with the news. When he reminded her that she had waited to report the rape for two months, so there wasn't much he could do in the investigation, Stephanie asked if she could fire him and get another detective on her case. He told her it didn't work that way. Late that night, she wheat-pasted a drawing on a wall next to the police station. In it, a skeleton sloth talks on a cellphone. "Have you made any progress on my rape case?" the caller asks. "I've been busy with the holidays," the sloth replies.

Stephanie never had many illusions. In January, while she was in Texas struggling with how to depict Jason and herself in the painting, overwhelmed by the momentousness of picking the image, one image to say it all, she told me that since Jason had taken her power away, and no one was willing to make that right, the billboard was the only way she saw to get her power back. "While I'm calling for justice, I don't expect it to happen," she said. "I want this to be my justice." It had to be, because it was all she ever got, and she got it herself. §

**KATHY DOBIE** has written for numerous publications, including *GQ*, *New York*, *Harper's*, and *The New York Times Magazine*. She is also the author of the memoir *The Only Girl in the Car*.

**ISADORA KOSOFSKY** is a documentary photographer and filmmaker. She is currently based in Los Angeles and Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her forthcoming book, *Senior Love Triangle*, published by Kehrer Verlag, will be available this fall.



SOMETIMES  
OUT OF SOMETHING

AWFUL

By

ROBERT  
ITO

Photographs  
by

MICHELLE  
GROSKO

LISA HANAWALT

How the depressive, unsettling, surprisingly buoyant humor of



SOMETHING  
Wonderful  
HAPPENS."

Lettering  
by  
LIANA  
FINCK

MICHAEL

BOB-WAKSBERG

— creators of **BOJACK HORSEMAN**

and now **TUCA & BERTIE** — is changing the adult animation series



# LISA HANAWALT

## AND RAPHAEL

BOB-WAKSBERG

are in the offices of ShadowMachine, an animation studio in Hollywood, reminiscing about the high school they attended. Raphael, dressed in a hoodie and jeans, his hair under a ski cap, is lamenting that he was voted "Class Clown," not "Funniest."

"How are those two different categories?" Lisa asks.

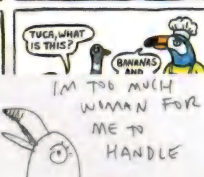
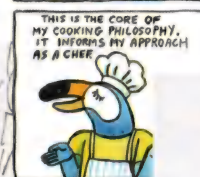
"Class Clown," Raphael explains, "is like, 'Ahhhhh, look at me, look at me!' Whereas 'Funniest' is like, 'Oh, a subtle wit.'"

"You were not subtle," Lisa responds.

The two launch into a back-and-forth about the boy who was voted "Funniest" — "Who the hell was that?" Lisa almost yells — and about the girl who was voted "Most Artistic," much to Lisa's continuing chagrin. "It's because she had friends on the yearbook staff," she insists. Names are named. They're talking over each other, laughing, then marveling at how petty they're being, 20 years on, and how maybe trashing their high school classmates might not reflect so well on them now. "Clearly we're over it!" Raphael says.

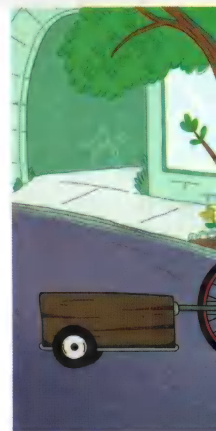
If they aren't, they should be. Raphael is the creator and showrunner of the animated series *BoJack Horseman*, one of the most groundbreaking shows on TV. Lisa, its production designer and a producer, created the show's animal-headed protagonists and watercolor-inspired palette. When *BoJack* launched on Netflix in 2014, it marked the streaming service's first attempt at an original adult animated series, leading the way to a roster that now includes shows from Guillermo del Toro, Matt Groening, and Nick Kroll.

In early May, Lisa unveiled *Tuca & Bertie*, an animated series on Netflix about the friendship between a boisterous toucan, voiced by Tiffany Haddish, and an introverted song thrush, voiced by a cast-against-type Ali Wong. This time, Lisa is the creator and showrunner, while Raphael is a producer. For decades, adult animated series have been created and run by guys, who in turn



hired all-guy writers rooms, which produced stories about guys starring other guys. Lisa is the first female showrunner of an adult animated series in nearly a decade, and she's done the opposite: She's created a show about two female best friends with two women of color as its stars. It's hard to imagine a bigger shift in the genre, other than maybe when *BoJack* first dove into topics like mental illness, opioid addiction, and the allure of celebrity. If Lisa wanted to upend longstanding American TV traditions even more, she could throw a sexually active Asian American (bird) couple into the mix, say, Wong and Steven Yeun, which, of course, she does.

Lisa, who is wearing a bright blue down jacket with "Tuca & Bertie" stitched on the front, pulls out a copy of her 2016 comics anthology, *Hot Dog Taste Test*, which features the earliest appearances of Tuca and Bertie. If *BoJack* started from a dark place — its working title was *BoJack, the Depressed Talking Horse* — *Tuca* is its tonal opposite,

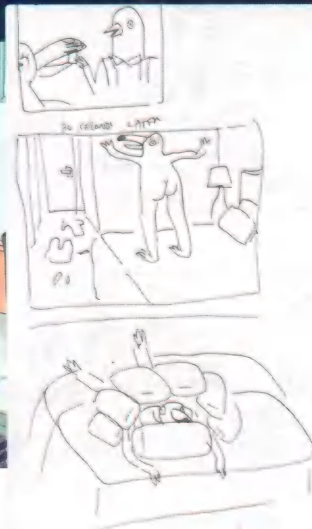




Images from  
the Netflix series



Preliminary  
sketches for  
Tuca & Bertie



from the samba rhythms of its theme music to its Crayola colors and cartoony sight gags. Anthropomorphic skyscrapers dance, giant turtles cruise canals like ferryboats — and that's just in the opening credits.

When I ask Lisa questions, Raphael chimes in with questions of his own, about whether she ever had birds as pets (in college), whether they're still alive (two out of three have died), and just what it is about birds she finds so interesting (they're "cute yet kind of scary and alien"). It's hard to tell if he's just being inquisitive, or if he's trying to protect her by blocking unwanted inquiries with friendlier (and funnier) ones of his own, or maybe he's trying to get her to promote herself — "Tell him about this!" but in question form — since her inclination is not to. When Lisa comes to "Planting," a story in *Hot Dog Taste Test* about Bertie and her husband buying a new house, he declares, "That one is my favorite of all of Lisa's comics." He says he likes its gentle tone — the story is, among other things, a paean to house plants. "I like it because it's not that funny," Lisa responds.

The discussion turns to *Tuca & Bertie's* sixth episode, in which Tuca's pet jaguar attacks and disfigures a delivery boy. "That was based on a nightmare I have," Lisa says. "I have a lot of really violent thoughts." The scene is both horrific and funny. Lisa loves jokes about farts and bodily fluids more than Raphael, but if one wants to see where their comedic tastes overlap, this is it. "We make a point of showing that he's OK!" says Raphael. "He becomes a movie star," Lisa adds. But he's maimed, I say. Yes, yes, they concede. "But his dreams come true," says Lisa. "Because life is like that, too. Sometimes out of something awful, something wonderful happens."

**LISA AND RAPHAEL** grew up in Palo Alto eight minutes from each other. Her parents were Stanford biologists. His mother and grandmother ran a Jewish book and gift store in town. Lisa loved horses ("I want to be famous for drawing horses someday," she wrote in a sixth-grade essay). Raphael was given the nickname Raizin when he was 9 and insisted everyone call him that until, at 22, he insisted they stop. He was one year behind Lisa at Henry M. Gunn High, "one of those schools where if you didn't take five AP classes and get 1600 on your SATs, you were considered subpar," she says.

The two found refuge in theater. He was the standout who secured, if not always the heftiest roles, the most exuberant ones. "I'd have to tell him to shut up all the time," says James Shelby, his theater teacher. Lisa was a self-described shy kid, who created posters and flyers for school plays and filled her sketchbooks with classmates reimagined as chickens or pirates. "It was kind of a way to make fun of people and talk s--- about them, but creatively," Lisa says. Raphael would sneak peeks at her sketches and make up stories to accompany them, and the two became close. In her junior year, Lisa was ditching classes and close to dropping out. When she took on a role in *Twelfth Night* that required her to sing and dance, the experience was both an ordeal and a turning point. "Mr. Shelby pulled me aside and told me, 'You have to be more outgoing. You have to try more stuff out there,'" she says. "Theater saved me."

Lisa went on to UCLA, where she majored in art. Raphael moved across the country to attend Bard College, where he majored in playwriting and was roommates for three years with Adam Conover, a fellow founding member of the sketch-comedy troupe Olde English. "We just lived and breathed comedy," Conover says. "We would



rehearse for a show or shoot a video, and then we'd go home and be with each other. And it would be like, 'Hey, what are you doing playing video games? You're supposed to be editing that video.'" After graduation, Lisa and Raphael began collaborating on the webcomic *Tip Me Over, Pour Me Out*. Written by Raphael and illustrated by Lisa, the series was a largely unflattering, loosely autobiographical depiction of his life in New York: his worries about getting and keeping a job, his indecisiveness, his lousy luck with women, his general disdain for other humans. Much of it seems like a dry run for *BoJack*.

On one of her trips to visit Raphael in New York, Lisa met Adam. After she returned to L.A., they talked on the phone every night for months, until Lisa decided to move to New York in 2009. "When I was there visiting Adam, I'd met all these cool cartoonists, like Julia Wertz and Sarah Glidden, and I was like, 'Oh, women my age who are making comics in Brooklyn,'" she says. "So I thought, *I'll move to New York and see how things go with this guy, and I'll have friends.*" She joined an all-female comics collective called Pizza Island, which rented a small workspace in Greenpoint. All the members were in their 20s and eager to make their mark, going to comics events together, pushing one another by example. Lisa found the group inspiring, one more sign the male-dominated industry was finally opening up. "Everybody was like, 'Whoa, all these women cartoonists are sharing a room! What are they doing in there?'" she says. "It was kind of a weird time in comics, where the old guard was changing into this new thing, where women were allowed to exist in multiples and make comics."

Soon after Lisa arrived in New York, Raphael decided he had to move to Los Angeles if he was going to break into TV. While writing pilot presentations and pitches for reality shows, he emailed Lisa with an idea for an animated series. His message described "a horse-dude," a former '90s sitcom star, who is now a "washed-up misanthrope who lives in a gorgeous bachelor pad in the Hollywood Hills." Lisa loved the idea but wondered if there was a way for the hero to "not be too much of a bum." The inspiration came, in part, from Raphael's first months in L.A., when he was renting the tiniest room in a friend of a friend's palatial home in the Hollywood Hills, feeling lost and alone. Raphael asked Lisa for illustrations that he could take into pitch meetings. Steven Cohen and Noel Bright, producers

at the Tornante media company, loved the idea and the illustrations, and when Michael Eisner, former Disney CEO and head of Tornante, gave his approval, work began in earnest. The whole thing seemed like the culmination of everything Lisa and Raphael had dreamed up when they were at Henry M. Gunn High.

But when Lisa was asked to join the show, she declined. Nobody could tell her how long the project might take (as it turned out, seven years and counting), or how much work it would be (a lot), or if the series would even be picked up. "I had just finished this children's book that I had spent six months on, and I was like, 'Ugh, I hate working with other people,'" she says. "I want to do my own thing."



"I didn't want to put any pressure on our friendship, so I let Steve and Noel make the offer," Raphael says. "Which maybe was stupid. But I also wanted her to do her own stuff, and I didn't want her to feel like I was roping her into something she didn't want to do."

When Raphael got the news, though, he admits feeling blindsided. "I didn't know how any of this worked, so I was like, 'What's that? She said no? We're going to someone else?'" For the next six months, Bright and Cohen tried out other animators, but nobody matched Lisa's feel for the show. "That's when they were like, 'We're going back to Lisa,'" Raphael says. This time, she said yes. The hiatus had given



AS ONE OF THE FEW WOMEN EVER TO OVERSEE AN  
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SHE'S ENTERING UNCHARTED TERRITORY. "I WONDER, SHOULD I BE PROUD?"

AM I A TRAILBLAZER?" SHE SAYS. "THEN I JUST FEEL HORRIFIED  
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didn't know what to make of a show about a talking cartoon horse that betrays his best friend, who's dying of rectal cancer, to further his own acting career and who goes on booze-fueled benders with the girl who, years earlier, had played his youngest daughter on TV. This wasn't a funny animal cartoon, but what was it? With its mix of Hollywood types and zoo creatures and a tone that is depressive, even bitter at times, the show was unlike any other animated show on TV.

Critics eventually came around. By the third season, Emily Nussbaum of *The New Yorker* called the show one of the "wisest, most emotionally ambitious and ... spectacularly goofy series on television." Like *Breaking Bad*, the show grew bleaker with each successive season. And, as in the case with *Breaking Bad*, viewers find themselves rooting for, horrified by, and, more than anything, mesmerized by the show's antihero. Throughout last season, BoJack is in emotional and ethical free-fall. In one episode, he goes to the L.A. River on a desperate dope run. In another, much-discussed episode, he spends its entirety delivering a rambling, spite-filled eulogy for his mom ("you were a huge bitch ... and now you're dead") before discovering that, oops, he's at the wrong funeral.

A COUPLE OF YEARS INTO *BOJACK*, Lisa and Raphael began talking about her doing her own series. Lisa's comics, which she continued to produce while making *BoJack*, range from personal anecdotes to flights of fancy ("Rumors I've Heard

her time to recharge. "I think I was flattered that they came back to me," she says.

After considering pitching the show to Fox, longtime home of *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*, the producers went to Netflix. The streaming service had been getting a lot of attention following the success of early series like *House of Cards* and *Orange Is the New Black* but had no original adult animated series or, as far as anyone knew, any interest in one. A new executive at Netflix, however, agreed to take a look. Soon after, *BoJack* got the go-ahead, with one stipulation: The network needed the show in six months.

When *BoJack Horseman* premiered in August 2014, many of the reviews were negative. Critics

About Anna Wintour") to fashion spreads with animals as models. Was there a way to create a show that might capture all those elements? The two tossed around the idea of doing a variety show, but there were stories and themes that Lisa wanted to explore that only a series format could capture. "Female friendships, specifically," she says. It was a topic she wasn't seeing in adult animation, "because people aren't buying shows about that."

But who would be the friends? Tuca and Bertie immediately came to mind. The two, in many ways, were dual sides of Lisa's personality: Tuca, her extroverted half, which she reveals through her comics, and Bertie, her introverted self, outwardly shy but with a rich inner life. In the series, Tuca is sporadically employed, an inveterate moocher, and a hoarders-level slob. She also has charm to burn and is unfailingly devoted to Bertie and Bertie to her. Bertie is as neat as Tuca is slovenly but is starting to question the staid orderliness of her life, from her sex-by-the-numbers

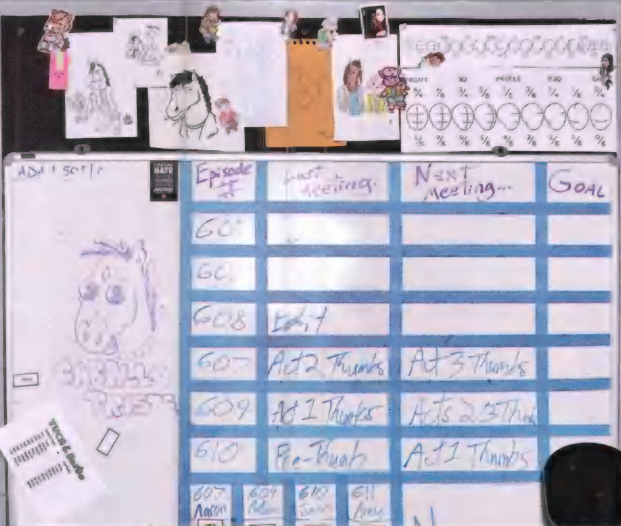




The BoJack weekly storyboard schedule



Tuca & Berthe  
Background Design Supervisor  
Sarah Harkey and Animation  
Director Aaron Long







Raphael confering  
with Tucci & Bertie Animation  
Director Janna Bowman





WHEN *BOJACK* PREMIERED, MANY OF THE REVIEWS WERE **NEGATIVE.** CRITICS DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO MAKE OF A SHOW ABOUT A TALKING CARTOON HORSE THAT BETRAYS HIS BEST FRIEND, WHO'S DYING OF RECTAL CANCER.

relationship with her boyfriend to her crummy job, where a bro-ish co-worker steals her ideas. Initially, Lisa and Raphael wondered how such seeming opposites could be friends, but it's Tuca and Bertie's differences — and the inevitable fights and breakups and makeups that come from them — that make their relationship such a compelling and heartbreaking one. United against catcallers and creeps and by a shared history that includes trips to the ER and beatdowns of two-timing guys, they're also discovering how much they're growing up and apart.



As one of the few women ever to oversee an adult animated series, Lisa knows she's entering uncharted territory. "I wonder, should I be proud? Am I a trailblazer?" she says. "Then I just feel horrified because it's taken this long. Meanwhile, men have been getting adult animated shows picked up left and right. It's really frustrating. It's not that there aren't any good pitches. All my friends have been pitching for years."

"Adult animation started out all male, and they just kept it that way," says Jessica Gao, an Emmy-winning writer who went to art school with Lisa. "It's very cliquish, and, at least in my experience, there is zero interest from the boys club to change it. It's working fine for them, so why change it? Other than to be decent human beings."

If anyone was going to break through, though, Lisa always seemed a likely pick. Kate Beaton, a Pizza Island veteran who has scored the trifecta of cartooning awards (an Eisner, an Ignatz, and four Harveys), sees Lisa doing anything from rom-coms to horror. "I don't read anything like her stuff anywhere," she says. "There's a mix of absurdity and sincerity in there. Whenever I read something like that, you think, *I wish I could rip this off.*"

No animated series has so deftly and directly grappled with the #MeToo movement as *BoJack* and *Tuca*, examining the topic from the distinctly different viewpoints of an entitled, mansplaining Hollywood has-been and two female best friends. In *BoJack*, the show's protagonist confronts years of bad behavior toward women, most of whom he barely recalls; in *Tuca*, there are jerks around every corner. For Raphael, a catalyst was Mel Gibson and the offensive comments he made about blacks, Jews, and gays and his begging Hollywood for forgiveness, which it eventually gave. Lisa's inspiration was closer to home. In one episode, Bertie discovers that her plumber has the keys to her place. Is he a menace or just a harmless weirdo? "That just felt like a real experience, where there's a man in your apartment and he has to be there, and you don't know 100 percent whether to trust him or not," she says. "Those came out of real-life stories that have happened to me and every woman I know."



In its first two seasons, *BoJack* did not include a single person of color in its regular cast. Alison Brie was chosen to be the voice of *BoJack*'s Vietnamese American ghostwriter/friend, a decision Raphael has described as the show's "original sin." ("I didn't want to cast a show with all white people," he says, "[but] I was surprised by how easily it happened.") For *Tuca*, Lisa and Raphael deliberately assembled a diverse cast, though they are quick to point out that these are not African American or Asian American birds ("because they're birds," says Lisa). Even so, it's tough to read Tiffany Haddish's toucan as anything but black or for Asian American viewers not to take joy in the thought of Ali Wong and Steven Yeun playing a sexually intimate couple.

Raphael says that when he first began working on *BoJack*, having Lisa around provided enormous comfort. "We didn't really know how to talk to anyone, but at least we knew how to talk to each other. I don't know what I would have done without that." That closeness meant that Lisa could push him in ways that maybe others couldn't: to ask why this character couldn't be female instead of male, for instance, or if there were other, better ways to tell a joke. "I feel like the greatest kindness that Lisa has done for me is to challenge my thinking in certain ways," he says.

Sometimes, she will make her point the same way she did in high school. "We'd be in meetings,"





**ROBERT ITO** is a journalist based in Los Angeles. He writes about film, television, and theater for *The New York Times*.

**MICHELLE GROSCHOPF** originally hails from Toronto, Canada. She currently lives in Los Angeles. She was named one of PDN's 30 New and Emerging Photographers to Watch in 2019.

**LIANA FINCK's** cartoons appear regularly in *The New Yorker*. Her latest graphic novel, *Passing for Human*, was published in 2018.



says producer Steven Cohen, "and I don't know if she would do it on purpose, but she would draw something and then leave it on the table. Of course, you'd have to look at it, and she would have perfectly captured the lunacy of a meeting, where a decision was not made or where it could have been a lot shorter."

Now, on *Tuca*, Lisa's the boss, and Raphael's the one with the suggestions. He helps with the nuts and bolts: how to tighten up a script, or negotiate the writers room, or pull the emergency brake on a meeting when something desperately needs to change. "That's been especially hard for me because Raphael, Noel, and Steve were my bosses at *BoJack* and still are," she says. "I think the hardest thing for me is just taking up that space and knowing that if I ask for something, suddenly they are like, 'Oh, OK, we'll make that happen.'"

After collaborating on *BoJack* for nearly a decade, each has separate projects going. Raphael just finished his first book, *Someone Who Will Love You in All Your Damaged Glory*, which Knopf is publishing in June. A collection of short stories, it reads like a compendium of all the funny stuff he couldn't squeeze into a *BoJack* episode. He is also working with *BoJack* writer Kate Purdy on another animated series, this time for Amazon, called *Undone*. Lisa recently completed her first graphic novel, *Coyote Doggirl*, a neo-Western that has been excerpted in *The Paris Review*. Out of her house, which she shares with Adam Conover, she co-hosts the podcast *Baby Geniuses* with comedian Emily Heller. Next year, Drawn & Quarterly will release an anthology of some of her earliest comics. "In her work, everything about humans that is gross and real and beautiful is up for discussion," says Tracy Hurren, who has edited three of Lisa's books. "Human failings are right there on paper, and she does it with so much joy."

**IT'S BEEN 13 YEARS** since Lisa first drew Raphael in those *Tip Me Over* comics, back when they were both just out of college, so I ask them to draw each other now, as grown-ups. Lisa beams. "This is not fair," Raphael says. "Should I draw with my left hand to make this even?" Lisa asks.

I'm expecting a quick doodle, but Lisa takes the assignment seriously, surveying Raphael every few seconds as she draws in curlicues of hair and bits of beard stubble. "I'm going to draw s---ty because I'm nervous," she says. "In some ways, I have the advantage because the expectations are much lower for me," he says.

Four minutes later, Lisa reveals her handiwork. Drawn with a felt-tip pen inside a lined Moleskine notebook, the portrait shows an exuberant Raphael, his grin big and toothy, his head encircled by radiating lines, like a halo. "This is a very confident version of me!" Raphael says, pleased. "You've drawn me much more anxious and slug-like before. This feels like me at my best." "Well, you've come into your own since we made that comic," she says. "You're a married man! You work on three TV shows."

Then, Raphael draws Lisa. His portrait takes a minute or so and looks as though it might have been done by a 7-year-old. Lisa is enveloped in a parrot costume, her wings stretched out in mid-flap. "That's what I wore for Halloween," Lisa says. From inside the bird's enormous beak, Lisa's face peeks out. "I was trying to capture the dichotomy of 'Look at me! Look at me!' with 'I don't want anyone looking at me,'" Raphael says. The costume is *Tuca*, but the face is unmistakably Bertie. \$





## THE SQUAD



IN VENEZUELA,









A MEANS OF SURVIVAL.











Katherine rises from the bunk bed she shares with her daughter, Hellen, and prepares two arepas for her lunch. Arepas, palm-sized white cakes made from corn flour and water, were once cheap and plentiful. These days, many Venezuelans can't find, or afford, the flour used to make them. Katherine, who goes by Katho, counts herself among the fortunate. As a professional cheerleader, she doesn't make much, but it's enough.

During Hugo Chávez's presidency, oil revenues subsidized staples like food, gasoline, and toilet paper; education and medicine were virtually free. Chávez's chosen successor, Nicolás Maduro, continued those policies, but in 2014, when the price of oil plummeted, affordable food, medicine, car parts, and countless other necessities disappeared from store shelves. The country's reliance on oil money and the government's years of mismanagement and corruption left the country in disarray. The already rising crime rate spiked, and citizens struggled to feed themselves, becoming dependent on government ration boxes. Protests erupted in waves, and the quality of life continued to worsen. Many in the working class, who once adored Chávez, turned their backs on Maduro. Three million Venezuelans have fled the country since 2015. Those who have stayed are plagued by power blackouts, water shortages, and uncertainty amid renewed political unrest.

With hyperinflation and a monthly minimum wage currently at 18,000 bolívars, or about \$3.50, it's become difficult to survive even with a steady income. For some, relief comes in the form of remittances; others work the black market. For Katho, and a team

of about 30 other women, stability comes from SecoCheers. The group, founded by athletic trainer and dancer Caridad Seco in 1998, a year before Chávez was sworn into office, is a freelance team of cheerleaders that performs at sports games and other events across the country. The \$2 to \$10 the women earn per performance buys necessities like flour, baby formula, medicine, and school uniforms that might otherwise be out of reach. Caridad earns a little more than minimum wage working a day job training special-needs athletes. Without the extra income from managing the team, she says she wouldn't be able to make ends meet.

The cheerleaders come from working-class barrios across Caracas. In better times, becoming a cheerleader offered competitive pay and more glamour than the government jobs or service positions that were available to them. Now, the cost of tights, makeup, and nails often soars above a month's salary. Then there's the price of plastic surgery. Caridad explains the calculus simply: The ones with more curves are selected for more shows.

After Katho prepares the arepas, she coaxes Hellen out of bed and into her uniform. She then drops her daughter off at her grandfather's house; he will drive her to school on his motorcycle. About 20 minutes later, however, Hellen runs through the back door, beaming. The teacher didn't show up again. Katho shrugs, grabs her by the hand, and they start down the stairs of the barrio to join the line at the bank. They wait for about an hour, amid desperate pensioners and employees late for work. When they finally make it to the front, Katho takes out the limit, about \$2.50. It'll cover a few bus trips to practice.

PAGES 60 - 61

**TOP** Performing at a Hugo Chávez memorial event, blocks away from his tomb

**BOTTOM** Mariana Guerrero, Margareth Madeleine Marciano Rodríguez, and Diana Rodríguez wait for the rest of the team to arrive. When Caridad first told the squad about the Chávez event, a third of the dancers refused to perform.

PAGES 62 - 63

**TOP** Caridad prepares breakfast for her daughter, Andreli, in their kitchen, which doubles as a storage space for costumes.

**BOTTOM** Katho hugs Hellen good night after returning from practice. Practices often run late, especially when a show is coming up. Katho lives with her mother, who helps with child care.

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The view from Hellen's grandparents' house as the sun rises over the barrio of El 23 de Enero in Caracas.





Caridad arrives at a boxing match between Venezuela and Cuba. Caridad has maintained the team's rehearsal schedule, even as Venezuela has become more turbulent. "We have to keep working. No matter what's going on in the country," she says. In their WhatsApp group, the women ask one another for help. "Does anyone have light? It just went out at my place. ... Could I shower at someone's house?" Recently, a few of the dancers wrote that they might be late for practice. Several were waiting in long lines to fill up water buckets. Caridad chimed in, "The show must go on."



Greysi Bello (center) leads the team through choreography for a reggaeton song. Greysi has been dancing with the team since she was 14, and Caridad thinks of her as a second daughter. Most of the senior cheerleaders have left. Venezuela and are now scattered from Colombia to Morocco.







Yonleinis Torres leads the team through some of her new choreography. Yonleinis, or Yoli, lives in Petare, one of the largest barrios in Latin America. She had been with SecoCheers for less than a year before she got promoted to the front line. She says that many of the girls from her barrio have had to turn to sex work. "Girls tell me, 'All you have to do is sleep with this man at this hotel, and they'll pay you \$20,'" Yoli says. "But I just stick to my dance thing."



Yoli with her younger sister. Yoli used to tour with Venezuelan model/singer Diosa Canales. "I went to the auditions, and she picked five girls, and none of them were me," says Yoli. "Then her boyfriend pointed to me just before it ended, and he said, 'And her.'" Yoli felt as though she had finally made it, and then the unrest broke out. Canales moved to Colombia, and the rest of the shows were canceled. Yoli found her way to SecoCheers.







At the boxing match, the cheerleaders ignored catcalls and posed for selfies with athletes and spectators. Caridad encourages the dancers to promote themselves on their personal Instagram accounts. A few have recently been uploading photos at opposition marches. "I think sports, like the arts, shouldn't be politicized," says Caridad. "If you choose sides, you can lose your career. But also, things have changed now, and there comes a time when you have to decide what side of history you'll be on."



The upper stands were filled with National Guard soldiers from the base nearby. The Venezuelan fighters appeared much thinner than the Cubans in their weight class. The night began to feel like a reminder of the crisis outside as Venezuelan lost his match. Finally, after what looked to be another loss, a young fighter made a comeback. The crowd screamed.







Rehearsing backstage at a cryptocurrency conference at a luxury hotel. Conference organizers passed out lunch bags to the team. A few ate, but most stashed the bags to take home to their families. The Venezuelan government had recently launched its own crypto coin, the petro, in an attempt to combat cash shortages and, some speculate, circumvent sanctions. The petro has done little to provide financial stability.



Mariana (below and above, *right*) in class at the Central University of Venezuela in Caracas, where she's majoring in forensics. Mariana comes from a middle-class family and sees cheerleading as a hobby. She hopes to work in law enforcement.







Katho prepares to sleep alongside Hellen after coming home late from practice, cooking dinner, and laying out their clothes for the next day. Their refrigerator is stocked with frozen meat, a couple of vegetables, and not much else. "The ration box comes pretty regularly here. We don't go without. We always find a way," Katho says. "Of course, there are things that are hard to find. Like milk. If it was for me, I don't need milk, but my daughter is growing, and I can't let her grow up without milk."



Katho leads her daughter by the hand to run errands downtown, including dropping off the trash and taking the bus to the metro to wait in line at the bank. The bank, which is located in the basement of a shopping center, had chaotic lines wrapped along the walkways outside. There were rows of chairs for senior citizens waiting for their pensions, which have been reduced to a few dollars. A young employee later announced that the bank was running out of cash that day for pensions, and the majority would have to return the following week.





## MEANWHILE in The WEST

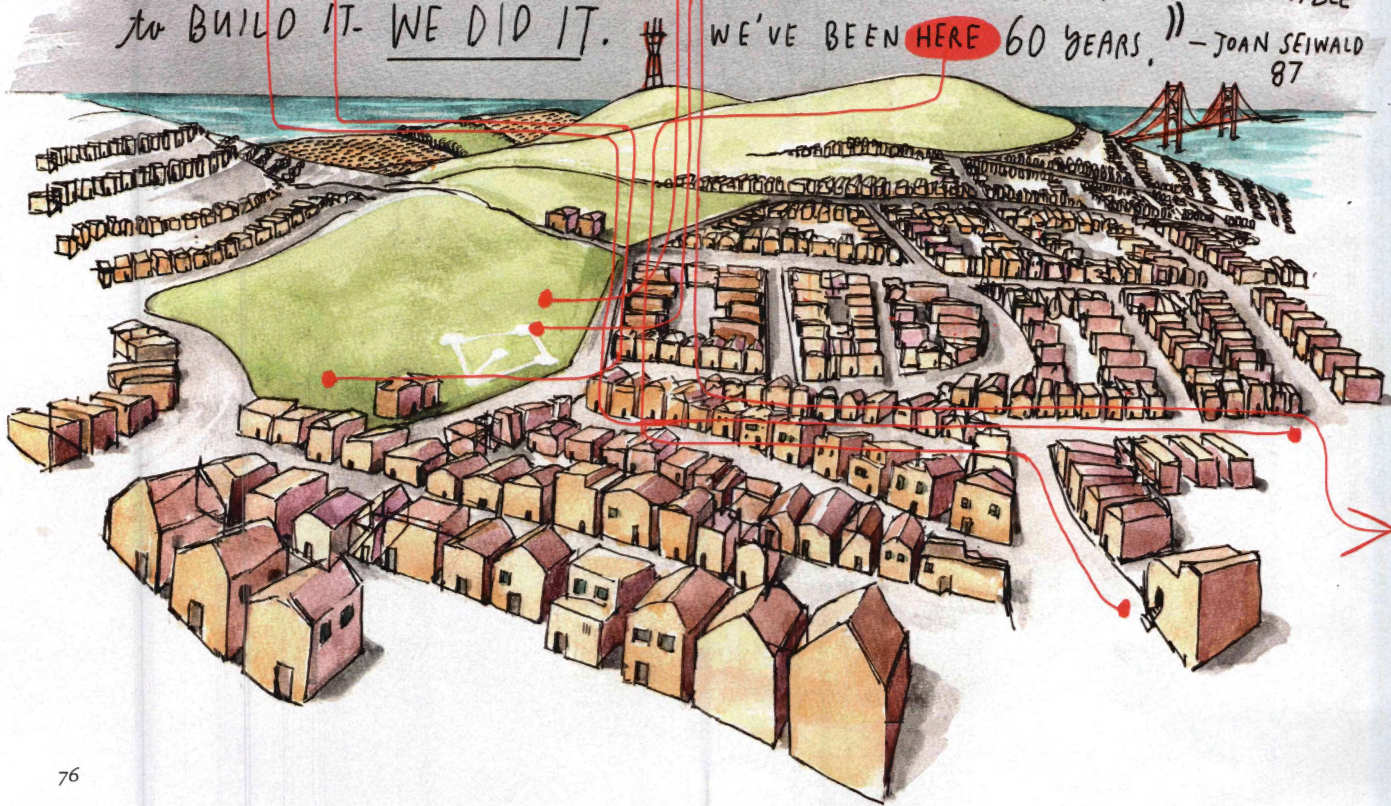
There's an ongoing debate in Oakland around the future of the I-980, a two-mile stretch of six lanes dividing West Oakland and downtown: Should it stay or should it go? Keeping it would accommodate vehicles and help prevent housing costs from rising, while removal could increase public transit, walking, biking, and reconnect separated neighborhoods. As cities continue to grapple with how to grow, who gets to decide, and who benefits, the largely uncelebrated story of three 1970s housewives in San Francisco's Glen Park neighborhood — Joan Seiwald, Zoanne "Zo" Theriault Nordstrom, and the late Geri Arkush, aka "the Gum Tree Girls" — is a reminder of how everyday people shape their neighborhoods.

by WENDY MacNAUGHTON

"They wanted to build a Freeway right through Second Base.

I HAVE FIVE CHILDREN. WE WENT to THAT PARK EVERY AFTERNOON. THAT'S WHERE I MET Zo. WE SAT on A BENCH, TALKED ABOUT EVERYTHING, EXCEPT POLITICS. A MAN WAS DIGGING in THE PARK. Zo ASKED HIM WHY. HE SAID THEY WERE GOING to BUILD A FREEWAY. SHE SAID, 'THE HELL YOU ARE.' SHE TOLD ME. WE GOT BUSY. I WROTE A LETTER to THE NEWSPAPER, and THEY PRINTED IT. WE HELD A MEETING at THE SCHOOL, and 400 PEOPLE CAME. IT SPREAD ALL OVER THE CITY. PEOPLE SAID, 'IF THEY CAN [BUILD A FREEWAY] THERE, THEY COULD DO IT to US.' CITY HALL CALLED US 'DUMB HOUSEWIVES' and GAVE US THE NAME 'THE GUM TREE GIRLS.'

WE WROTE to SUPERVISORS and WENT to MEETINGS. THEY PUT US LAST on THE AGENDA, so Zo BROUGHT HER KIDS and LET THEM LOOSE. THAT MADE THEM LISTEN... EVENTUALLY, THEY GOT SICK of US. THE DIRECTOR of PUBLIC WORKS CONCEDED THEY WEREN'T GOING to BE ABLE to BUILD IT. WE DID IT. WE'VE BEEN HERE 60 YEARS." — JOAN SEIWALD 87







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